



**THE
DEVIL
IS A
PART-
TIMER!**

16

SATOSHI WAGAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY

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WAGAHARA
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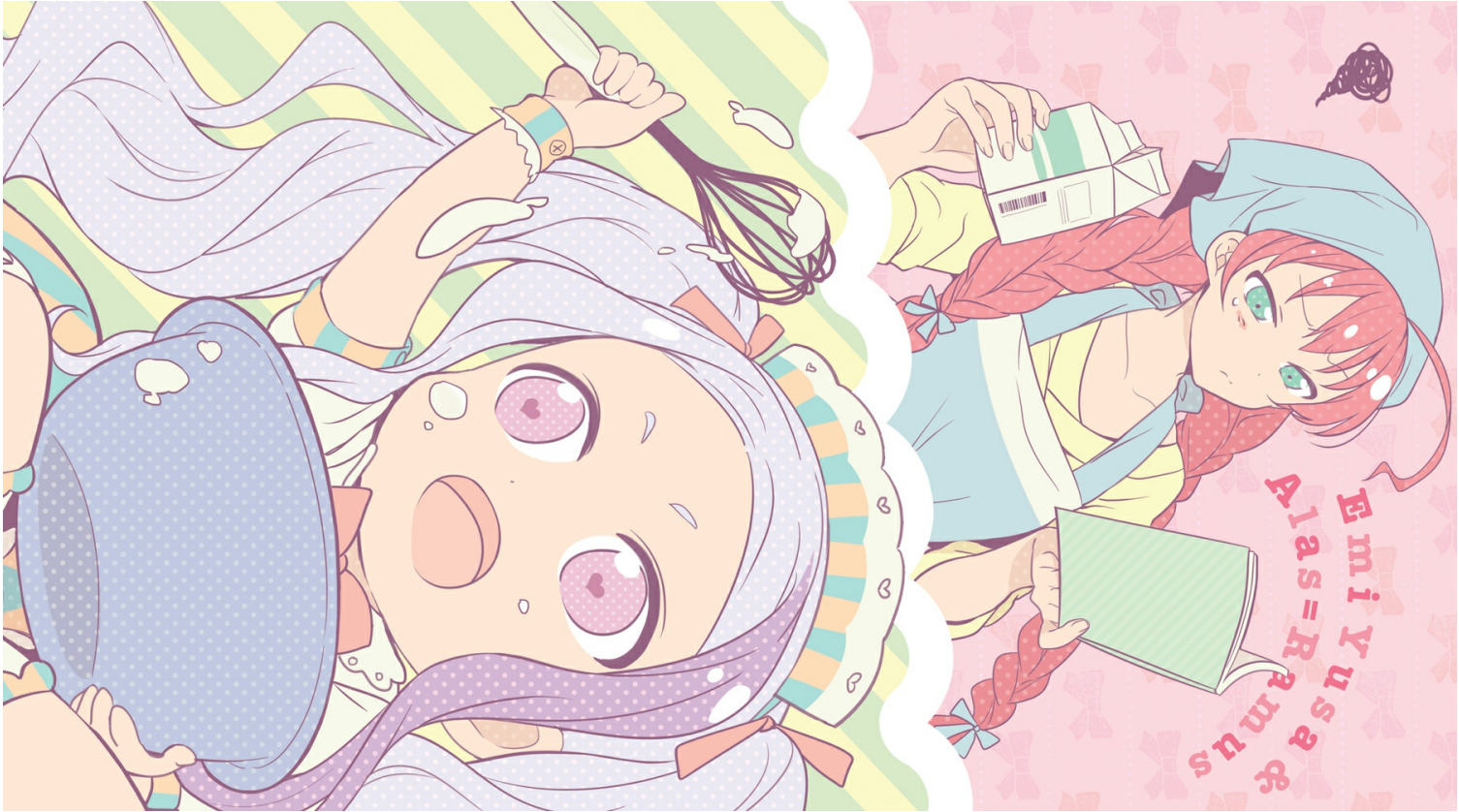
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SATOSHI WAGAHARA
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THE DEVIL IS A PART-TIMER!, Volume 16

SATOSHI WAGAHARA, ILLUSTRATION BY 029 (ONIKU) Translation by Kevin Gifford

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HATARAKU MAOUSAMA!, Volume 16

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2016 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: April 2020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Wagahara, Satoshi. | 029 (Light novel illustrator) illustrator. | Gifford, Kevin, translator. | Steinbach, Kevin, translator.

Title: The devil is a part-timer! / Satoshi Wagahara ; illustration by 029 (oniku) ; translation by Kevin Gifford; translation by Kevin Steinbach.

Other titles: Hataraku Maousama!. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2015— Identifiers: LCCN 2015028390 | ISBN 9780316383127 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385015 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385022 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385039 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385046 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316385060 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316469364 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316473910 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316474184 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316474207 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316474238 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316474252 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975302658 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975302672 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975302696 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975302719 (v. 16 : pbk.) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.W34 Ha 2015 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015028390>

ISBNs: 978-1-97530271-9 (paperback) 978-1-9753-0272-6 (ebook)

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**THE DEVIL
KING GETS
SENTIMENTAL**



THE DEVIL KING GETS SENTIMENTAL

From somewhere in the distance, a dog's howl ripped through the shadowy night.

Only a few cars passed down that way, with almost no human figures to be found—not even a stray cat crossing the street.

Step into a side alley from here, and the ambient light visibly dims, the nearby stoplights cycling through their lonely red-yellow-green routine to an empty audience.

At one in the morning, the neighborhood of Sasazuka, in the Shibuya ward of Tokyo, was slowly putting the previous day behind it, settling down to sleep and preparing for the new, upcoming day.

But in the midst of this, a lone figure was crouched over his bicycle, pedaling with an unsteady pace, as if feebly pursuing the past.

He was clearly exhausted, body and soul. Along with that howling dog, the horns from the cars traversing the Koshu-Kaido road, and the knifelike breeze of cold air that dominated the city, the only sounds occupying the night were this man's breathing, the chain of his bike, and the occasional screeching of his rear disc brake.

He took no notice of those sources of noise, even though they were clearly there; but each obstacle stood boldly before him, sapping his already-drained will to continue.

Through it all, the man discovered his home looming ahead in the darkness, drumming up what little spirit he had left as he pushed down on the pedals. The building was like a shadow itself, completely bereft of human activity, but it was nonetheless his lone island of solace.

He stopped his bike, his breath forming wild, wispy curls in the air, and forced

his already-spent body to climb up the building's outdoor staircase. The handrail felt like a cylinder of ice on this cold winter's night, as did the doorknob that greeted him at the top. It felt like winter was designed from start to finish to rob this man of any strength he dared keep for himself.

Now in the hallway, the only sound was the buzzing of a fluorescent light about to breathe its last. Nobody but him was there, and nobody else was beyond any of the doors that lined the walls in greeting.

His numb hands fumbled the key to Room 201 several times before he finally succeeded on getting it into the lock.

The room beyond, as illuminated by the hallway light, was barren. No furniture or fixtures of any sort were visible. The man pulled the cord dangling from the lone light upon the ceiling. It revealed a single pile of clothing in the corner, neatly folded up for him.

"One AM, huh..."

The man looked down at his watch as he removed it, then glanced further, toward the center of the floor. He quickly averted his eyes.

"Let's just sleep. Tomorrow's gonna suck."

He placed the watch into his pocket, then removed his coat and hung it off a hanger set on the windowsill. He shivered a bit, the indoor temperature not much higher than outside, and began to disrobe, changing into a set of sweats he used as pajamas, as quickly as he possibly could.

"Ugh, it's freezing," he muttered to himself as he plugged his phone into its charger. Taking a few steps over to the decrepit-looking kitchen area, he filled a well-worn kettle with water and turned on one of the gas burners. Then, from next to the sink, he picked up something that resembled a tortoise shell. Its lid twisted off. It was a Japanese hot-water bottle, and once the water was heated up enough, the man quickly filled up the container.

"Oops..."

Wiping away the steaming water that had spilled out from the lip, the man closed the bottle and tucked it inside a handmade-looking cloth pouch.

“This is the only thing saving me right now...”

With that, he unfolded and laid out his futon. A full futon. Not the simple sheets he had been using all summer. An actual mattress, a blanket, even a full-on duvet!

“Nnnhh..... Ahhh...mmph...”

Clutching the hot-water bottle close, the man moaned in pleasure as he burrowed deep inside the brand-new bedding. The fabric of the futon was just as frigid as the air temperature, but between the bottle and his own heat, it ever-so-gradually began to grow warm. However, as much as that combined heat loosened up his body, it could do nothing to open up his tightly wound heart.

Not long ago—not very long at all—this apartment room had been bustling with bright activity. The man had had roommates to live with, a litany of guests to entertain, and between them all, he always had a crowd to deal with around the dinner table. They didn’t need a gas heater; the place always felt perfectly warm and cozy to him.

Now, though, he was alone. The table they all gathered around was gone, as were any utensils he could cook with. The refrigerator contained some cucumbers, a cube of *konnyaku* gel, a container of milk, and little else; it was actually colder outside the fridge than inside it, so the man kept it running mainly to keep the milk from freezing.

Nearly everything that had kept this room a warm place in the past was now far, far away. In exchange, the man got this futon.

He had prepared himself for this state of affairs, or so he thought, but now, he could physically feel precisely how unprepared he really was. Nobody was coming to visit. Nobody was waiting up for him. Nobody was cooking. Nobody was calling his name. Everything that was here, only a moment ago—gone.

“Ashiya,” the man whispered. “Urushihara. Emi, Alas Ramus, Suzuno.”

Only the man himself, curled up in his bedding, could hear his voice.

“Chi...”

The sigh, formed just as his body was warm enough to be comfortable, puffed out into a small, white cloud before dissipating.

“...I might be a little lonely.”

The man would have a battle to fight soon. A battle to earn the birthday present he felt he owed his daughter. There would be a god to slay for that, and to prepare accordingly, most of his friends and acquaintances, along with nearly everything he owned, had been transported to Ente Isla, the Land of the Holy Cross. And now that it was all said and done, Sadao Maou was beginning to feel seriously lonesome.



The future of mankind, the fate of the world—none of that mattered more than a lone request from their daughter. Such was the judgment of Sadao Maou and Emi Yusa.

Back when they were strictly the Devil King and the Hero, two presences that could never coexist in harmony, they were greeted with Alas Ramus, a “daughter” who nestled in right between them. The three of them weren’t related by blood, and “Mommy” and “Daddy” didn’t exactly have the healthiest of relationships, but the bond between parent and child was real nonetheless.

The potential fall of Ente Isla, a destiny that the archangel Laila had spent the past few centuries (a millennium, even) laying the groundwork to prevent, was something that made neither Maou nor Emi bat an eye. Maou, being a demon, had no motivation for rescuing mankind, and apart from being called a Hero in her past, Emi had no duty to play the savior once again. The people around them—those who treasured Emi and Maou in their lives anyway—fully understood that. But no matter what Laila said in a vain attempt to convince them, no matter how much Gabriel (connected to Laila behind the scenes in complicated ways) pushed them in her direction, neither Maou nor Emi felt the need to step up and defend Ente Isla’s people. Not the two of them, not Shirou Ashiya, not Hanzou Urushihara, not Suzuno Kamazuki, not even Chiho Sasaki.

But in the end, even after finding this safe, pleasant home in Japan after days of blood, pain, and fighting, all of them (Chiho included) had resolved to throw themselves into the fray, to defeat a figure that was the closest Ente Isla had to

a god and also, oh yes, save the planet as a result. There was no lofty ideal behind this, no noble drive to step up and save the world. They had decided to fight strictly because of a single, forlorn little girl, and the simple, modest hope she had for her life:

“I want to see Malkuth. I want to see everyone.”

As Alas Ramus was revving up for her first Christmas in Japan, Maou talked with his acquaintances about what to give her as a present. But all she wanted was to see the people from her past again—her old comrades, the friends she held dear, the family she loved. And as a Sephirah, born from the Tree of Sephirot that protected all humanity on Ente Isla, the “everyone” Alas Ramus wanted to see was connected to the battle Laila and Gabriel wanted to wage.

Now all of them—the Devil King, the Hero, and all their friends—were united under a single goal. They had to make the girl’s wish come true. They were all ready to risk their lives once again, on a stage with world-changing consequences, all for the sake of Alas Ramus.



“I *do* intend to risk my life for this. Even now.”

The shallow light of a winter’s morning hit Maou’s face through the window, waking him up. His watch told him it was half past six. The sunrises were starting to come earlier again, but the chill he faced outside his futon was still bracing. Because he’d purchased a full futon set, something he swore he would never invest in, the pain of getting *out* of that warm sanctuary every day was beyond description. He had forbidden himself from buying a futon because he feared doing so would root him in Japan too much to return to Ente Isla; now, ironically enough, he was forced into buying one just as he was forced to go back. Abandoning this warm abode and exposing himself to the freezing air surrounding him took an astonishing amount of resolve and courage.

“I’m never gonna get breakfast if I stay in here... Dahhhh! Oof!”

Maou was still balled up in the futon, whining to himself, but it was almost time for work. Struggling to find any willpower at all to muster up, he leaped out of the futon.

“Ahhhhh, it’s freezing, it’s freezing, ugghhh, I’m gonna diiiieee...”

The fatigue, like an aura of haze around him, quickly vanished, but in its place was a sudden rise in blood pressure that made him wonder if heat shock was on the horizon for him. Fumbling around at six in the morning wasn’t going to make a heater show up in this apartment, though, so he filled his kettle once more, cupping his hands in front of it as he patiently waited for a fresh hot-water supply.

“I’m sorry, Alas Ramus,” he admitted to a daughter who wasn’t there. “I think I’m losing my enthusiasm...”

Rubbing his hands and legs against each other, he looked around the empty, almost cavernous-looking apartment, reflecting on how this all happened.

It all began with Ignora, the leader of the angels and the “god” who ruled over heaven, or at least, heaven as pictured on Ente Isla. Reaching her would involve traveling up there, of course, but—due to reasons that still remained murky—heaven was not currently accessible by a direct Gate jump. It wasn’t clear whether this was a two-way restriction or only applied when going from a mortal plane to heaven, but it meant the only way to reach the blue orb the angels called their home base was to physically travel there from Ente Isla.

They would need a spaceship, in other words—and this existed in the form of Devil’s Castle, the vast edifice built by Maou in the middle of the Central Continent and where he engineered the invasion of Ente Isla. However, as they recently found, restoring Devil’s Castle to spaceworthy shape would require replacing a few parts.



These parts were the so-called relics left by the Devil Overlord Satan. The relics were, in no particular order: the Nothung, a fabled magical sword; the Spear of Adramelechinus, wielded by the late Great Demon General Adramelech; the Sorcery of the False Gold, a tome of forbidden magic; and the Astral Gem, a crystal of concentrated energy whose manufacturing method was lost to time.

Together, they were called the Noah Gears, and Maou's group needed to track down all of them—but apart from knowing that everything except the Spear was in the demon realm, they had zero leads. Camio, Maou's regent who was currently ruling there, was combing every inch of demon land in search of the sword, the tome, and the energy gem, but it would clearly take time to see results.

Meanwhile, over on Ente Isla, a combined team of humans and demons was working to prepare Devil's Castle for launch, as well as search for demon survivors from the war before any hostile humans unwittingly killed them. The human side was led by General Hazel Rumack, hailed as the most influential Western Island leader outside the imperial court of Saint Aile; and Albert Ende, former companion of the Hero. The demons, meanwhile, answered to the young Malebranche tribal leader Farfarello—connected to the Sephirah children, aware of Maou's presence in Japan, and on astonishingly friendly terms with the human Chiho.

Under this trio, the army was working to prepare for this human-demon tandem effort to slay their own "god," under the guise of dismantling Devil's Castle and wiping out the remaining demonic forces. The two species joining hands like this, even if it was just partially and provisionally, would have been impossible to imagine a scant few years ago; seeing it unfold like this indicated what kind of crosstribal peace Ente Isla enjoyed at the moment.

But this peace was both heavily limited and built off extremely personality-driven reasons; just a tiny sliver of nations and people knew the reasons behind it, and spreading the word far and wide would never convince everyone else of its validity. Unless they defeated the god who lived up on her moon world, the holy force that enveloped this world would disappear before long, wiping out humanity. It was far too outlandish a story to swallow in one gulp. Attempting

to explain that an angel who appeared in holy scripture had learned of this world's potential end, and that the Hero and the Devil King were working together to help everyone after they had been blown into another world, would make most people wonder about your sanity.

Ente Isla was in the “post-Devil King” era. The rebuilding process was well underway, and every nation was engaged in a power struggle over who'd gain the most advantageous positions in the new world order. If this operation was revealed to anyone not currently a part of it, more than one national power would take it as *humans colluding with demons*—and the fallout would spread worldwide like a flash flood. There were already people who saw the Hero's existence as too much to bear; they already tried to betray her once.

For now, they had enough commanders to work with, considering Ashiya, Urushihara, Suzuno, and Emeralda were all ensuring things went smoothly between humans and demons. The chain of command was working flawlessly as a result, and even if the heavens staged an attack, they had Gabriel and Laila on tap—as well as Ashiya and Urushihara, who had full access to their demonic powers in Ente Isla.

The result of all this was that Sadao Maou and Emi Yusa weren't needed on-site, and therefore unwelcome. Gathering so many powerful figures in a single place tended to attract attention, after all.

Maou had been personally involved with the Western Island's leaders, and with Ashiya's Eastern Island connections, many people from that continent had also joined the army. For similar reasons, Hazel Rumack, head of Saint Aile's palace guard and general commander of the Federated Order, would never want Albert Ende and Emeralda Etuva, the Hero's closest friends, on the Central Continent without good reason. Add the elite troops from the Eastern Island's Knights of the Eight Scarves, and the whole area was already sticking out like a sore thumb.

At the moment, the Eastern and Western Islands were in deliberations, seeking common ground over the East's meddling in the Central Continent. The Northern and Southern Islands, alongside the numerous smaller nations on the Western one, believed in that pretext—but to avoid attracting curious eyes, Rumack, Albert, Emeralda, and the Eastern knight leaders had taken pains to

rotate their schedules, making sure their stays in the Central Continent didn't overlap too closely with one another.

After all, besides the crossplanetary travelers in Suzuno and Emerald's party, the only people from the East who were in on the story were the Azure Emperor and a handful of generals among the Eight Great Scarves forces who served him. In the Western lands, that group consisted of the palace guards under Rumack, the sorcerers in the Holy Magic Administrative Institute, and a few clerics with the Reconciliation Panel; it didn't include the leader or crown prince of Saint Aile, or any of the Six Archbishops, who wielded decision-making power in the Church. The Northern and Southern Islands, meanwhile, were completely out of the loop.

In this situation, having someone like Emi (whose face was too well-known) or Maou (who'd have hordes of demons falling to their knees in supplication whenever he passed by) hanging out there would simply get in the way. As Suzuno Kamazuki, chief logistics lady at the site and a woman who had clout with the East, the West, humans, and demons, put it: "I will call for you when I need you. Until then, live in Japan as you always do. Chiho has college examinations awaiting her next year; this is a vital time for her. To a high school senior, a round trip of one hour and twenty minutes is nothing to sniff at. We cannot afford to make her travel away from her school and her job too frequently. I will not demand she stop visiting, but as it was in Room 201, there is a certain line that needs to be maintained. Plus..."

She gave Maou a smile, one that seemed to chide him despite the gloomy air surrounding it.

"I am sure you being in Japan would help calm Chiho."

Maou wanted to say a lot about that but couldn't find the words to counter her. He was, at first, reluctant to have Chiho come to Ente Isla to back him and Emi up. She was certainly involved with Ente Isla now, of course, but Chiho lacked the strength to fight, and the idea of taking a high school teen to a battle that could decide the fate of worlds filled him with anxiety. What surprised him, though, was how no one was against Chiho making the trip. If anything, they welcomed her.

“I wanted to have her come here sooner or later!” Emi effused.

“Indeed,” Suzuno replied. “I was hoping I could give her a tour of my hometown.”

“If we have the time, she simply must see the imperial seat of Saint Aiiie, too...”

Ashiya, standing alongside Urushihara, shrugged. “Well, why not? Apart from the angels, there is no one on Ente Isla who would wish harm upon her. As long as she doesn’t stray too far from Devil’s Castle, we and the Malebranche can keep her safe enough.”

“Yeah, what’s the big deal, dude?” Urushihara chimed in. “It’s not like Chiho Sasaki’s stupid or anything. If we tell her *Don’t go anywhere dangerous*, she’d be smart enough to follow that.”

In fact, it turned out that Maou had nothing to worry about. Once he’d brought the Earthling to Ente Isla, Hazel Rumack had made sure Chiho always had a guard with her—a suggestion from Emeralda, perhaps. Even Farfarello was eager to bodyguard her, for reasons that Maou assumed he hadn’t been around to witness. In a way, all this attention almost made Chiho a tad uncomfortable. Plus, in the end, Emi’s need to keep her identity on the down-low meant she was often working alongside Chiho anyway. The girl didn’t have just an iron wall of protection; it was more like a full-on fallout shelter.

By this time, Chiho had fallen into a regular routine—crossing worlds via Room 201 with some food and other provisions; chatting with the demons and humans she was close with, then returning to Sasazuka before it grew too late. It was really Maou who had problems to deal with. The main one: that forty-minute-long journey each way that Suzuno mentioned. With Maou’s current living situation, it was a pretty big burden.

“Maybe I better head back for today... My shift ends at six...but, ah, if I go to the bathhouse and stuff, it could wind up being more like nine...”

Emi had always been living by herself in Eifukucho, as did Suzuno in Room 202. But Maou had roomed with Ashiya since the very start, splitting up chore duties in Japan under a system designed with perfect precision by Ashiya. At the moment, Ashiya was busy leading the demons and Eight Great Scarves knights

in Ente Isla, and his base of operations was there anyway, so if Maou wanted any domestic contribution from him, he'd have to travel to his apartment from work, then take the forty-minute journey across the Gate. With as many acquaintances around Sasazuka as he had now, Maou couldn't say who might see him if he opened a Gate in the middle of town instead of returning home first.

This made Maou's schedule maddeningly complex. The journey between his job at the MgRonald near Hatagaya Station and Villa Rosa Sasazuka was five or six minutes by bike, fifteen on foot—fairly close, and Maou structured his work shifts to take advantage of this. It let him pull off power moves like back-to-back closing and opening shifts. But when another forty minutes of commuting was added to this, then suddenly, the schedule turned into a gauntlet.

If Maou was closing at MgRonald, the absolute earliest he could reach his apartment was twelve forty at night. If he went on a Gate cruise, he'd be at Ente Isla at one twenty AM Japan time—and presuming he ate dinner and so on, he'd likely get to sleep around two. But if he was opening the next day, he had to be at MgRonald no later than six thirty. It meant he'd have to sleep at two, then wake up at five if he wanted time to eat breakfast and make the long Gate crossing. What's worse, being a demon (which he was, regardless of whatever human form he took on Earth), he couldn't rely on an angel's feather pen to open a Gate, like Chiho and Rika could. If that feather pen allowed them a first-class bullet-train seat to Ente Isla, Maou had to take the highway route on a rickety old beater car—and much like driving a car, he had to stay alert while the Gate spell was active. No napping was possible on the way.

So basically, there were dates on Maou's schedule that made it all but impossible to return to Ente Isla between shifts. On nights like those, if he wanted to eat dinner, he'd have to use the MgRonald employee discount, grab something from the twenty-four-hour convenience store, or use the few cooking tools that hadn't been taken to Ente Isla and attempt to cobble something together.

"I've got so much laundry to do..." Maou sized up the pile of clothes on the floor, then he checked the clock as he recalled the current contents of his wallet. "Crap. I don't want to waste the money, but I guess I gotta hit the

Laundromat...”

Ashiya’s absence didn’t just affect his daily habits; it made every chore impossible to organize.

Maou had planned to clean when the place screamed for it, but since work and Ente Isla came first, it wasn’t long before a fine layer of dust had settled on the bathroom floor, the windowsills, and the spaces between the kitchen’s wood paneling. Thanks to his long shifts, it was hard to find the time to dry the laundry at home, too, so he had come to rely on the dryers at the Laundromat once the pile grew impossible to tame.

He knew from his early days in Japan that this was a decadent luxury; he could practically hear Ashiya admonishing him with every 100-yen coin he tossed into the dryer.

Emi, his rival, was less of a threat now. No human or angel could best him, and he had fully regained his demonic force. To Satan, the Devil King, the world was his oyster—but to Sadao Maou, the human being, life felt oppressively constricted.

But what was Chiho doing? Chiho, a girl he figured would help out on the food and cleaning front? Maou had actually forbidden her from hanging out at Room 201, apart from when she used the Gate. The reason, of course, was that Maou’s residence was a literal man cave.

Chiho had become a frequent visitor, motivated by her feelings for Maou, after Urushihara and Suzuno moved in. To her, Room 201 was not just Maou’s home, but also the place where a lot of her friends hung out, which was the main reason she was there all the time. Now that it was Maou and Maou alone, things were different. Room 201 had always been an entirely male domain, but Suzuno had been right next door, and the paper-thin walls ensured she could hear everything. Now, however, Maou was usually the only person in the entire building—and having a teenager in a high school uniform regularly visiting a part-timer living alone in his crappy apartment was not really something modern society would smile upon. She had, in fact, already been called to task about this, based on the sensibilities that ruled in modern Japan.

Thus, whenever Maou was forced to let Chiho head to Ente Isla, he

established the rather mean-spirited condition that the two of them should never be alone together in Room 201. If she had to use a Gate, she could either work with Suzuno and Emi to make one in Villa Rosa Sasazuka or do it in her own room instead. This exasperated their friend circle—why *that* attitude, at *this* point?—but Maou doubled down on it, and Chiho had meekly accepted it.

“I guess it’s important, huh? Making...distinctions like that.”

The statement, delivered with a straightforward smile, gave Maou a guilty conscience—perhaps because he never got around to making the “distinctions” he should have made a long time ago.

Still, it wasn’t like he was totally cut off from Ashiya, Urushihara, Suzuno, Nord, or Laila. Ashiya had too many responsibilities to come home very easily, but Suzuno and Urushihara swapped taking trips back to Earth every two or three days. She had even begun setting up a vegetable garden in the backyard, when he wasn’t paying attention. Suzuno or Nord would also come home to babysit Alas Ramus whenever Emi—now a prime contributor to MgRonald at Hatagaya, despite cutting down her hours a bit—had a particularly long shift.

But despite that, Maou was now facing many more days than before where he never talked to anyone outside the restaurant. It made him realize all the more exactly how blessed he had been, with all the kindness his friends gave him.

And so morning came, about a month into this new life of living alone, incomparably quieter and more barren than his life before.

“Maou! Maou! Heeyyyy!!”

“...” Maou winced at the merciless knocking on the front door, cursing it in his mind.

“You are going to the training again in afternoon, no? Starting when?!”

“...I’m working through the lunch rush, so one PM.”

He had half muttered the words, but the woman on the other side had superhearing at times like these.

“Yahoo! If I ask Mikitty for early lunch, I have enough time! Today, I go to new

all-you-can-eat restaurant!”

“...Yeah, great.”

“See ya!”

The presence in the hallway loudly drifted off, never getting to see how badly Maou twisted up his face.

“I seriously wanna punch the dude who created this whole ‘latent force’ system.”

Thanks to assorted circumstances, there was one person who still loomed just as large in Maou’s life—Acieth Alla, a woman who didn’t have the words *modesty* or *concern* in her dictionary. He could imagine her briskly smiling, imagining the culinary delights waiting at this new eatery. He hadn’t eaten anything yet, but his stomach already felt heavy.

Upon finishing his MgRonald shift at one, Maou took the Keio Line to Shinjuku, in the heart of Tokyo. As he walked to the site for his full-time staffer training, he spoke up to Acieth, who was fused back inside him.

“So how was the all-you-can-eat place?”

“Huh? You will take me to it again?”

Maou still had trouble grappling with Acieth’s leaps in logic. It was usually Miki Shiba, landlord of the Villa Rosa Sasazuka he stayed at, who took her around—why was it “again” for him?

“...”

“Just kidding! Come on, I am just the kidding! Maou! You need broader heart!”

Acieth must have picked up on how frayed his heart was, because she tried (and failed) to make up for her words quicker than usual. She was, after all, one of the biggest reasons why he couldn’t keep a broader heart. She was as gluttonous as always, she never demonstrated a care in the world about him, she didn’t try to hide her conniving side, and it was impossible to tell what she’d do next.

Waging this god-slaying battle to make Alas Ramus’s dream come true was a good thing for Acieth as well, being Alas Ramus’s younger sister. But Maou was

stressed out. If it was Acieth who had crashed into his yard in that golden apple instead of Alas Ramus, he doubted he'd ever have adopted a father-daughter relationship with her, much less accept Laila's plea. Apart from their faces, there was nothing alike about the two sisters.

"So you know, the restaurant, it was mainly about the meats."

"An all-you-can-eat meat deal? Wait, did you go to a *yakiniku* place for lunch?"

Fused like this, Acieth's voice could be heard only in Maou's mind and to nobody else. Maou, meanwhile, had to actually speak to get his words across, so an impartial observer could marvel at the disturbing sight of a young man in business attire mumbling incoherently to himself.

Maou's face had taken on a dour look as of late, besides. If he didn't have his phone to his ear like he did now, pretending to talk to someone, he'd likely be put in a facility long before the police got involved.

"Uh-uh. The all-you-can-eat yakiniku near us, they say I eat too much. They ban me."

"Seriously?"

Maou wasn't aware of this, but whenever Acieth joined Amane Ohguro (her usual caretaker at the moment) at a place like that, the manager would usually have to intervene once she started treating it like an eating contest on TV. If someone with Acieth's voracious appetite went all-out at a *yakiniku*, Maou couldn't blame the place for booting her.

"Mostly, they have big metal skillet, and they cook the steak and the sirloin. If you pay more, then drinks and salads and soups and curries and desserts, they are all free."

"Wow, not only drinks and soups but all that, too? That's brave of them. Do they give you any rice?"

"Oh, yes! All-you-can-eat rice."

"Huh. Remember the name of the place?"

"The name? Um, what was it? It was maybe Big Guy? Or Giant Boy? ...But why

you ask so sudden? Normally, when I eat, you say, 'Oh, it is the bad manners, it is bad for wallet.'"

"Just one second."

Maou lowered his phone and used it to search for the place Acieth mentioned, relying on her vague memory of the all-you-can-eat curry location for his keywords. He found the chain restaurant in short order.

"Oh, here? So if you pay extra, you get free drinks and an all-you-can-eat buffet for salad, the soup of the day, curry, and desserts. Hmm... Too bad. I like the price, but this is more a diner than anything."

"What is it you mean?"

"A few people in my training program are talking about a get-together sometime soon. We haven't settled on a date yet, but we're starting to toss candidates for a location around, so I'm looking for places we can go to."

"Eww." Acieth sounded disgusted. "Too much work. A get-together like that, it is all Oh, pour beer for boss, Oh, let boss berate you in front of friend, Oh, let coworkers who are only good at the sucking-up-to-boss run all over you, then Oh, blackout on the sake you can't drink, and then coworker says Oh, you are the wimp the next day, yes? It is the waste of precious time, yes?"

"Where did you take all that from?" Maou shook his head, the pace of his walk slowing down. "Stop sounding like Urushihara if you don't even know what you're talking about. Get-togethers like this, you never know how they might help you out down the line. I might wind up sharing office space with some of these guys later on, so unless you wanna get on their bad side, it never hurts to hang out and have a drink."

"It is what you say, but you are not so, ah, enthusiastic, yes?"

"...I'll partly admit that."

It was rare to hear Maou sound unmotivated about work. He knew that, in this fused state, Acieth could partially pick up on what he felt, although it wasn't some kind of full-on telepathy trick.

"I mean, you see lots of different trainees attend these classes. You got

people with customer-facing jobs like me, you have people from the bun manufacturing plants, you got hires from other companies, and you got brand-new guys brought on to lead new locations, which means I have to do a bunch of on-location training, even though I know it by heart. So we're all talking about going out some evening."

"*Hmm.*"

"And I do want to talk to people from our rival chains and the processing plants. One of 'em used to serve in the Japan Self-Defense Forces, and he's still young, but I'm kinda curious about what his life's been like. But... I dunno. I think this get-together isn't gonna work like that."

"*Why not?*"

"Well, the guy who suggested it is this dude in his midtwenties, from a region the Hatagaya location isn't part of, and it's like...he's not really hiding it, you know?"

"*No? You are being the not very specific. It is strange.*"

"I mean, you can tell he's aching for a fast-track career. He's always one of the first to speak up in when working in a group. It's like he wants to lead, and everyone else needs to follow. And he suggested this meetup, too, even though we've only shared a classroom a few times and the attendee list changes a lot. I guess what I'm saying is...for all the bark he gives you, there's not a lot of bite, you know?"

That was just it. This man had a tendency to act like the able leader in any group he was in, even though his skills were decidedly on the average side. People were already starting to shun him a little for that, and even Maou had to admit he wasn't too good with that type of person. But he wasn't *incompetent*. As Maou's beloved boss, Mayumi Kiski, put it, "A salaried employee is asked for more than merely their strengths on the front lines." Here he was, after all, trying to break the ice and help all these trainees from different regions and professions to work together. The larger the firm you worked for, the more vital those kinds of skills became.

"*So what is big problem with it? You understand his reasons, yes?*"

“Sure. Assuming breaking the ice really is his sole motivation.”

“Huh?”

“There’s someone else in our group. A sort of young girl. You’ve seen her a few times...”

“Whaaa?! You found another of the sacrifice for you, Maou?!”

“...”

“...Oh, don’t be mean,” Acieth sulked. *“I know. It was Kusunoki, or Masashige, or something close.”*

“Kusuda. Her name’s Kusuda.”

Being fused with Maou during training, Acieth was at least casually familiar with everyone Maou met there.

“It’s totally obvious this guy, our team leader, wants to get closer to Kusuda. Like, when we’re working in a group and stuff, he’s practically stuck to her like glue.”

“Oh, so that man organizing party, he likes this Kusuda? Who was he? Ashikaga, or Godaigo, or something?”

“...Nitta. His name’s Nitta. If you don’t know someone’s name, don’t go spitting out anything that comes to mind.”

Acieth’s suggestions sounded a lot like the names of famous old samurai. Maou began to wonder what kind of media she consumed at Shiba’s place all day.

“Well, Nitta, he is poor judge of women! I can tell, that Kusuda, she plays poor, innocent little girl type! You first look at her, she is kind of mature, like Chiho, but she is just good at the buttering-up of you! You know, I saw Kusuda in training center bathroom, and she was giving someone the bad mouth in there! Chiho, she never does that!”

“You saw her *where*?” Maou was taken aback. Several major revelations were packed into that statement.

“You know, the second class! You say ‘Oh, I cannot concentrate when you do

this carrying on,' so we separate. Then, you give me money to go eat. So I walked around training center a little..."

"Why did you do that...?"

He did vaguely remember something like that. They were holding staff interviews that day, way up in the same building Maou took his McDonald Barista training in. It was the kind of place filled with nothing but salarymen in business suits, so a silver-haired, violet-eyed preteen was going to stand out a bit.

"Right, well, between this, that, and the other thing, I'm not too enthusiastic about the meetup, no. I feel like it's all just a pretext, you know?"

"But you say it is vital, no? Because you do not want to be the bad side with them, and all?"

"...Kinda." Maou shrugged at having his words bounced back at him.

"But you know what it is, Maou?"

"What?"

"If you are the talking to me about all of it, it must bother you great deal, huh?"

"...!"

Maou stopped. He was at the west exit of JR Shinjuku Station in the afternoon, a fairly crowded place to stand motionless. Several passersby gave him dirty looks as they shoved their way around his side.

"Emi and Chiho, they don't come to apartment too much lately, and Ashiya and Lucifer and Suzuno, they don't come back much, either. You are that lonely?"

Had he weakened to the point that even Acieth was pointing it out to him? Was it that bleedinly obvious? Or could you describe this as being "weakened" at all?

To be sure, Maou's life had changed a lot, starting around the new year. People and things he normally took for granted were gone from sight. But as Acieth just hinted at, they hadn't completely vanished. He saw Emi and Chiho

all the time at work, Urushihara and Suzuno came home on regular occasions, and he maintained close contact with Ashiya. Sometimes, Maou went over to Ente Isla himself, even. Things had only been like this for about a month—but did Acieth really feel *that* compelled to speak up after looking at his work and his personal feelings? It seemed impossible to imagine.

“...Well...”

“Mm?”

“To be honest, I’m getting pretty sick of takeout.”

“Oh, be more honest!”

Acieth seemed to almost enjoy the desperately bold front Maou attempted to put up. These changes were, frankly, tiny in the great scheme of things. Compared to the first few days after losing to Emi and getting thrown into Japan, they were nothing. But it was only human to feel stressed out over sudden environmental changes.

Maou had put a firm deadline of “Alas Ramus’s birthday” on their god-slaying battle. It was already early February. If things went the way Maou pictured them, it’d all be settled in less than five months. Of course, that was a lofty goal; they hadn’t found any Devil Overlord relics yet, and once they reached heaven, there was a long hit list of targets up there. Nobody had any idea what kind of battle awaited. But Maou had promised his “daughter” that the Christmas present he couldn’t obtain would be her birthday present instead.

So with all that fighting to do and promises to keep, why was he letting *this* run him down?

“You are no good as Devil King.”

“Stop talking to me like you’re reading my mind,” Maou said as he began to walk again. “But I guess I am overreacting a little. Sorry.”

“Well, I feel fine, and Mikitty, she lets me eat lots of the delicious things, so I never get sick of takeout. But...”

“Mm?”

“Don’t you think your guard, it is being let down too much?”

“My guard?”

“Yes! I know that everyone, they work at Ente Isla, and you and Emi are on standby here, but the angels, none of them said Oh, we will be doing the nothing, yes?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Mikitty and Amane, they are strong, so maybe the angels do something under the covers, hiding from them? You know, those little stinkers!”

After learning the whole story behind them, Maou knew full well that Acieth’s negative assessment of the angels was absolutely right. It chagrined him a little.

“And you know, Suzuno, she is not home very often. Are you thinking about safety of Chiho? You cannot trust words of Gabriel, ever!”

“We’re all good there. I had him tell me about the security net built around Chi’s place. If she’s around there or in Sasahata North High School, and a non-Earth-based source of holy or demonic force appears, the net sends out a distress sonar that covers a radius of over a mile. Me, Emi, and Amane have worked things out so at least one of us is always in the area. If something goes awry, we can respond in a flash.”

“A sonar with a radius of over a mile? Won’t that annoy neighbors?”

“Nah, it’s not at a frequency that normal people can hear. It’s basically a big barrier—a simple reactionary sonar, so even if it goes off, it’ll be kind of like a buzzing sound to Chi. And if she’s out of range, I told her to let me, Emi, Suzuno, or Amane know first.”

“...Hmm.”

“What? You got a problem with that?”

“No,” a dubious Acieth replied, looking more dissatisfied every second. *“If you and Chi are okay, then hunky-dory, but...”* She began to choose her words more carefully. *“But I wonder, is Chi really okay with it?”*

“She said it’d put her mind at ease.”

“Oh, no, no good.”

“What do you mean by that?!”

“I mean just what I say. We are close to destination, yes? I am full for today, so I will nap and be quiet, okay? See ya!”

“Wh-whoa! Acieth! What are you talking about...? Hey, are you really asleep?”

Maou could sense Acieth’s presence vanish, like a snap of one’s fingers. He flipped shut his phone, which had never been on a call anyway, and sighed.

“...Come on.”

He didn’t need it spelled out for him. He knew full well: Laila said it, Ashiya said it, and Suzuno thrust it in front of his face. Plus, Chiho herself said it to him again. But he didn’t know how to give an answer, and that made everything he did with her seem vague, and not quite fully there. Or was it? He didn’t know.

Going back to the previous example, there really weren’t many methods Maou had at hand to guarantee Chiho’s safety at the moment. The best he could do was have a system where he’d receive instant alerts if something came up, but he knew that wasn’t what Acieth meant—and having Acieth doubt him only made him angrier.

“You say that, but...what am I supposed to do...?”

The moment Chiho first admitted her love for him, Maou managed to keep his cool under the hot summer sun. Internally, he was torn, but Chiho had nothing but love to offer him, nevertheless.

And as he stewed over this, a man and a woman passed him by, holding hands. Lovers, no doubt, in the midst of a relationship. He had thought, at one point, that going around together like that was what Chiho pictured for the two of them. The past few months, however, had dissuaded him of that. Simply building a close kinship with Maou was not enough to satisfy Chiho. It wasn’t that she *didn’t* want such a thing, but if that’s really all there was to it...

“...I could’ve had an answer for her more quickly,” he whispered to himself as he walked through the doorway of his destination.

“Oh, Maouuu!”

He heard his name called, with a tempo and intention that seemed to at least imitate Chiho's, and looked up.

"Good morning, Kusuda."

Kusuda jogged up to him. Maou didn't recall her first name.

"Did you think of any place good for the meetup Nitta mentioned?"

"...Nah, not really. We'd all be coming from different places, so I know it's pretty obvious, but somewhere around Shinjuku's probably best."

"You're right. We don't have the contact info for all the trainees yet, either..."

This training session was populated by a motley crew of students from assorted fields, but between the shifts they all had to work at their respective MgRonalds, it wasn't like every student attended the same classes. Since the teachers hadn't said just how many students were in this session, this meetup was de facto limited to the people that Nitta, as organizer, had met enough times.

"If you ask me," Kusuda continued, "I think it's still kind of early to hold an after-hours meetup like this, huh?"

"Oh, maybe, but if the opportunity comes up, I don't think it's a bad thing, per se."

"Yeah, maybe you're right, but I think we'd get to know each other well enough while we work and train together, like we're doing now. I gotta admit, I feel like Nitta's treating this like a college frat welcome party, like *Let's get together and all be friends!* He's, like, all over me, you know?"

She sees right through you, Nitta, Maou said in silent prayer. He wasn't sure if Nitta was scheduled for today's session or not, though.

"Oh! By the way, Maou, while I've got you, I'd like you to have this."

"Huh?"

Maou looked at the thing Kusuda offered him and raised an eyebrow. It was a small box with cute wrapping paper and a ribbon on top.

"What's that?"

“Aww, can’t you tell? It’s some chocolate!”

“Huh? Chocolate? Oh, for Valentine’s?”

Only then did Maou realize what Kusuda meant. Today was February 7—a bit early for Valentine’s Day activities, but if you weren’t sure whether you’d see your target on the big day or not, the timing wasn’t too unnatural. Besides, in Japan, women often gave little Valentine’s gifts like this to men in their lives out of politeness more than anything else. Nothing really deep was meant by it.

“Wow, are you sure?”

“Yeah! Go ahead! Oh, but I don’t have any for Nitta, so don’t tell anyone, okay?”

Maou began to honestly pity Nitta.

“Well, thank you. I’ll be sure to enjoy it.”

This sort of polite gift played much the same role as this upcoming meetup. They were both tools meant to smooth personal relationships. Maou didn’t take this to imply that Kusuda had any feelings for him at all, but if someone like his coworker Kawata found out about it, he was sure the man would be telling him to go die in a fire or get stabbed in a back alley. The tradition in Japan was for women to give men gifts on Valentine’s, then for men to reciprocate on White Day a month later; he didn’t know if they’d have training on March 14 or not, so he thought it best not to discuss that yet.

“If I see you in March, I’ll be hoping for something back, okay?”

With that knowing sort of prompt, Maou gladly accepted the chocolate. The ritual was complete.

“What do you think we’ll be doing today?” she asked.

“I dunno. It said something about a preplanning meeting.”

Before long, they were bantering about today’s schedule, Maou shaking the cobwebs from his conversation with Acieth and switching into business mode. But Maou had forgotten something—because he had avoided seeing her in person lately, as Shiba and Amane had been watching the girl. He forgot that when it came to the topic of food—especially certain sweets, such as chocolate

—Acieth could be downright diabolical.



The next day, Acieth was crouched down next to Suzuno, who was in the middle of weeding the vegetable garden Shiba let her build in Villa Rosa Sasazuka's backyard.

"Hey, Suzuno! When do I get chocolate from someone?"

"That is rather out of the blue."

"They have the thing, it is called Valentine's, yes?"

She had only just fallen asleep inside Maou's body, but then, her sensitive nose picked up the aroma of chocolate—chocolate that should've still been inside its wrapped box—and it promptly woke her up. Hoping to know why Kusuda was giving Maou sweets like that, she explained everything she saw to Suzuno, who was back on Earth to work on the garden.

"Oh, Valentine's Day?"

Suzuno had no idea what kind of sleeping beast she was prodding. The issue was twofold—Maou was working over at Hatagaya Station that day, and Suzuno didn't think to ask why Acieth would take such a sudden interest in Valentine's Day. She had been in Ente Isla until that morning, holding Mass for the knights of Saint Aile stationed near Devil's Castle, so it'd be asking too much of her to consider that.

"Well, my apologies, Acieth, but as a woman, you will not be receiving any of that."

"Wha—*whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!'*"

Suzuno's statement resulted in an apocalyptic scream.

"How—how can world be so much of the cruel...?"

"That is simply how it is. That is how Valentine's Day works." Suzuno, kneeling by the garden, looked up at the aghast girl and chuckled. "There are several theories behind how the tradition began, but the day was christened to commemorate a saint, and now, in many nations, it is a day where women give sweets to men. The exact kind of treat is up to the gift-giver, but in Japan,

chocolate has been the historical favorite.”

“Chocolate... My chocolate...”

Acieth still hadn’t recovered from the shock. Exactly who she thought she was getting chocolate from remained a mystery.

“But why can’t the woman receive it...? Can—can I become the man from now on?”

“You intend to change your gender just for the free chocolate?” Suzuno snickered further at the deadly serious girl. “Well, as I said, nothing can be done. The whole day is a way for women to express the love they have for the men in their lives.”

“Huh?”

Acieth blinked.

“But there is no need to worry. Here in Japan, there is another custom known as White Day. On March 14, a month after Valentine’s, men give women chocolate as a way to return the favor.”

“Really?!!” Acieth, spirits fully recovered, clapped her hands, her mind made up. “Kusuda, she said she ‘hope for something back’ in March from Maou! She means that, yes?”

“Kusuda? Maou? Um, Acieth, where did you hear about Valentine’s Day in the first place...?”

Hearing an unfamiliar name next to Maou’s made Suzuno’s heart freeze. But Acieth wasn’t even paying attention, fist raised high in the air as flames danced in her eyes.

“So... Wait! Kusuda, is she *gunning for* Maou?!”

“Acieth? I hesitate to ask, but this Kusuda person...”

“Yes! Kusuda! The girl who give Maou chocolate at training! She makes it all seem, ‘Oh, this just my obligation,’ but I think she means it for real! If no, then why care about March?”

“What?! A-Acieth?!” Suzuno, fearing she’d said something she could never

take back, ratcheted up her voice a little. It scared her to see how Acieth went from knowing nothing about Valentine's Day to spouting off all the intricacies of the holiday and how it figured in Japanese life.

"Well! No time to waste! Maou is the poor man! I cannot have Kusuda take my chocolate from him on the White Day!"

"Calm down, Acieth! We need to talk this out! In the workplace, women give chocolate to men all the time on that day. It is just a harmless little social custom; there is nothing special about—"

"Oh, I must tell Chiho! Chiho, she can teach me how to make chocolate treat, and I give to Maou and get big brownie points! My big sis, she gets all attention lately, so now is the big chance!"

"Wait...!"

Her fears were realized. Suzuno had no idea what had transpired between Maou and this Kusuda person, but if it was Acieth telling the story, she'd no doubt take a packet of cheap candy and turn it into a triple-layer chocolate cake. And with Chiho so concerned lately about what distance to take with Maou, if she heard about him getting intimate with another woman on Valentine's Day, Suzuno could only imagine her sobbing, head in hands, all over again. But it was too late.

"Chiho! I smell her over there!"

"W...wait..."

By the time she sputtered it out, Acieth was already running, leaving a footprint as deep as a fence post in the ground as she set off. Suzuno, grasping at empty air, slowly lowered her hands.

"I will have," she said in a quivering voice, "to apologize to Chiho and the Devil King later." She took out the phone tucked behind her kimono belt and began sending a warning text to Maou, no doubt giving his all to work at the moment and blissfully unaware of anything.

"Umm... Acieth has learned some...mistaken facts about Valentine's Day... Ah."

She pecked away at the keys, wiping the dirt from her hands first, but then noticed the clock on the upper right-hand corner of the screen. The blood drained from her head.

“No!!”

It was a little past three in the afternoon. She flung off the cloth she used to tie her hair back and stood up.

“Wait, Acieth! Chiho is still at school!”

It was Suzuno against a Sephirah child in this short-distance sprint to Sasahata North High School, and she had already given her a minute’s head start. But she ran off anyway, fervently hoping to keep Chiho safe...but before leaving the apartment grounds, she hit the brakes and ran up to Room 202.

“Ah, Alas Ramus! I cannot leave Alas Ramus behind! *Ugh!* Why did this have to happen?!”

Alas Ramus, left by Emi this morning and currently in dreamland for her afternoon nap, awoke to find herself on Suzuno’s back. Now Acieth had *two* minutes on her. And with every fiber of her being, Suzuno knew just how fatal those two minutes would be.

**THE HERO
STRUGGLES
TO DEAL WITH
WORKPLACE
ISSUES**



THE HERO STRUGGLES TO DEAL WITH WORKPLACE ISSUES

“Wait, you don’t do it?”

“Why would we? It’s a pain in the ass.”

It was just past the lunch rush, and Emi was giving a smiling Akiko Ohki, coworker and veteran kitchen jockey, a surprised look. It was well into February by now, and as she compared the order forms for the seasonal Mini-Chocolate Pies with the inventory that came in, Emi thought to ask Akiko about how this MgRonald location’s staff handled Valentine’s Day. It turned out the female crewmembers didn’t bother with chocolate or any other gifts for the guys.

“Did you do that at your last job, Emi-Yu?”

“Not *me*, so much as everyone at the office.”

“Ahh, yeah,” Akiko replied as she stocked the heater with Mini-Chocolate Pies. “Call centers usually run on pretty stable shifts, so that makes sense, but there’s never been any obligation like that here in Hatagaya. I was expecting something like that when I came here last year, but it came and went with nothing to show for it, so I brought it up to Kisaki eventually.”

It seemed that Mayumi Kisaki, manager at the MgRonald, had a less-than-rosy impression of the tradition. “I wouldn’t recommend the custom between crewmembers,” she had said, effectively prohibiting it. “You’re free to give whatever you want to each other outside the property, but that’s strictly between you and the other person.”

“I think she’ll probably tell you and the other guys who came in this year about it soon,” Akiko added. (That would include Chiho as well.) “And besides, do you actually find giving out chocolate *fun* at all? I’m not expecting triple the amount back or whatever, but we got more guys than girls working here, so that’s more to ask of them. Plus, if you don’t have shifts around those times in February and March, it’s like you get shut out of the whole thing. Neither side

really gets much out of it. But anyway, no, we don't do it, for all those kinds of reasons."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

It wasn't called Valentine's Day, of course, but Ente Isla's Western Island did have a tradition of women baking sweets for men as a sign of their feelings for them. Back in the village of Sloane, where she grew up, this usually meant cookies and sweetened bread around harvest time, but Emi wound up being thrown into battle against the Devil King's Army before anyone taught her that custom, so she had never gotten to join in. Learning about Valentine's Day last year, while she worked at Dokodemo, therefore made her more than a little excited. She gave her obligatory chocolate to her boss and her boss's boss; they replied on White Day with little boxes of *rakugan*, a traditional Japanese treat, to all the women on staff.

"*Rakugan*?" Akiko remarked. "That's those hard sugar candies that get served with tea and stuff, right? Those are neat."

Emi recalled how enthralled she was by the intricate shapes and designs *rakugan* came in. She became a regular purchaser for some time afterward.

"So..."

"Hmm?"

"Talking about outside MgRonald..."

"Yeah?"

"Do you have, like, a reason to think about Valentine's Day this year, Emi-Yu?"

".....Oh."

There was nothing very sudden about the question. It was Emi who brought the topic up. But still, for just a moment, her brain shut off on her. She groaned, and that groan kept her from answering immediately. Akiko, of course, picked up on that interval of silence.

"Whoa, no way."

"N-no! I don't!"

It was really remarkable. Subtle shifts in breathing rhythms and microscopic changes in your line of sight could sometimes be so much more eloquent than the words themselves.

“Wow, I’m surprised.”

“I *said* I don’t!”

“I didn’t think you were into that kind of romantic stuff.”

“Akiko!”

“But he doesn’t work here, right? You’re part of the team by now, but you haven’t been here *that* long... Oh, but you knew Maou before now, didn’t you?”

“W-Wait...”

This was tremendously frustrating to Emi. She wasn’t trying to hide anything, but there was no way to phrase a response that implied the opposite. She could feel her cheeks redden—not out of shame, but out of simple panic. Akiko wasn’t the type to take a topic and go hog wild with it, but given the air around them as of late, her and Maou being treated as an item was beyond inconvenient.

“Aw, there’s no need to get so worked up about Valentine’s chocolate. It’s not like one or two boxes are going to dictate the rest of your love life.”

“I’m not getting worked up!”

But Emi knew full well that it looked that way. Or maybe she really *was* worked up. Because when Akiko—who was now smiling warmly at Emi’s reaction—first asked the question, she had, for a single instant, a thought. The time lag between having the thought, and realizing she was now capable of naturally thinking such thoughts, was what sealed her fate.

“By the way, there’s a superawesome chocolatier near my school. You wanna know more about them?”

“No, thank you!”

“Aw, you’re so *cute*, Emi-Yu.”

Emi, realizing this line of talking would only drag her further into the swamp,

ended it and tossed the final chocolate pie into the heater. But then, demonstrating perfectly terrible timing, Maou made his way downstairs from the café counter.

“What’re you two chatting about? Kisaki would yell at you if she was here. Do you have a copy of the order form? There’s something I need to check upstairs.”

“Um, oh, uh, right. The order form... Oh, here it is.”

Emi had been raising her voice. Realizing the cause of her delayed response to Akiko pitched it up even further. Akiko, whether she picked up on this or not, grinned to herself as she walked by Emi.

“Sorry, sorry. Emi-Yu just said she passed out chocolate on Valentine’s Day at her last job, so I was telling her how we don’t do that here, y’know?”

“R-Right,” Emi stammered.

“Oh. Valentine’s, huh? ...Ah, yeah, we got one extra pack here we didn’t order.”

Maou demonstrated little interest in the topic as he skimmed through the order form, eyebrows lowered. Seeing this annoyed Emi a bit, but Maou lifted his head before she could fire back.

“Hey, speaking of Valentine’s, I got some thank-you chocolate just yesterday.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, did you?”

Emi looked taken aback. Akiko, on the other hand, leaned forward to hear more.

“Yeah, but I don’t know what to do about it. It’s not like her and I have any relationship at all, so...”

“Maou, if Kawacchi heard that, he’d diagnose you with rich-kid disease and kill you.”

“No, I mean, we haven’t even seen each other all that often. What do people normally do with things like this?”

“Well,” Akiko said, “a lot of people give out chocolate out of habit more than

anything, instead of expecting anything back. I'm not saying you should ignore it, but there's no huge, pressing need to give her something, is there?"

"Mmm, maybe, but it came from a pretty fancy place. Have you two ever heard of..."

The French-sounding brand name Maou then uttered was unfamiliar to Emi's ears. Akiko, on the other hand, blinked a few times in response.

"That's...that's the chocolatier I was gonna tell you about, Emi-Yu."

"Oh..."

"Choco... What was that?"

"Chocolatier! A person who makes fancy chocolate for a living. There's this little one in a residential neighborhood near my college. It's not even all that well-known on the net or anything. Wait, are you sure this was just 'thank-you' chocolate? 'Cause that place doesn't go cheap at all."

"I...I'm pretty sure? She's one of the people training with me, but this was only the third time we've seen each other."

"Hmm... It's hard to tell from that, but that chocolate seems like more than a thank-you to me."

Akiko scrunched up her face a little, although there was still brazen curiosity peeking out from it.

"Well, what are you gonna do about it?"

"Huh?" Maou frowned at Emi's oddly blunt question, then at his own indecision. "...Well, I dunno what. Aren't you supposed to repay a gift with something half the value or whatever? Ashiya will yell at me if I just let it be, but I have no idea how much this cost her. I don't have a computer at home right now, and it's kind of a pain to search on the net with my old phone..."

"Half the value?" Akiko rolled her eyes. "This isn't a business negotiation."

"It doesn't matter whether it's expensive or not," sniffed Emi derisively, "or how rare it is. You think she gave it just to be polite, don't you? Then why don't you be polite to her in return?"

“Is that all there is to it?”

“What else is there to it?”

“Yeah, I guess so, huh?” Maou looked convinced enough at Emi’s dry assessment. That, too, got on Emi’s nerves. “Ah, well. Sorry to take up your time with that.”

“Yeah, I bet Kisaki would yell at you if she heard this.”

“I hear you. See ya for now.”

Maou breezily returned upstairs, with Emi glaring at his back and Akiko watching her from the side before saying something that snapped Emi back to reality.

“...You think Chi knows about that?”

Emi turned toward Akiko. “I don’t think so!” she blurted with the urgency of a war declaration.

“Yeah, probably not. You know how Maou can totally forget about stuff like that sometimes. I feel like Chi’s intelligent enough to not let things like this faze her, but intelligence is different from feelings, so...”

The fact that Chiho had feelings for Maou was an open secret, clear enough to anyone close to the two of them. Those emotions were so clear and straightforward, everyone around them hesitated to mess with or poke fun at them about it. But this wouldn’t be the first time mental lapses on Maou’s part affected Chiho’s public behavior—something Kisaki upbraided him about every time it happened.

“Yeah,” reflected Akiko, “Maou may look nearly perfect, but that’s the one bad habit he has, and it’s a killer.”

“You said it.”

Emi could name quite a few more bad habits (or worse), but she held back on saying them out loud. If she did, she knew Akiko would ask how Emi knew all that stuff about him.

“How much you wanna bet that in a few days, he’ll be all like *Oh no, I got chocolate from Chi, too, now what?*”

Judging from past behavior, that sounded incredibly likely to Emi. But if she ordered him to keep quiet about this other woman, she knew it could come out anyway and damage Chiho's pride. Letting Chiho know in advance, meanwhile, would just mess her up even more. And considering all the warnings Ashiya and Suzuno had given him, not even Emi thought Maou was dumb enough to ask Chiho directly for advice.

“.....”

But thinking that far, a bizarre supposition formed itself in Emi's mind: *What if he receives this chocolate but can't talk to Chiho about it, then gets guilty about hiding things from her, so he starts acting all weird in front of her and she figures out the truth anyway?*

As her friend, Emi never wanted to see Chiho's feelings get hurt. Turning her thoughts around, this was a situation Emi needed to keep an eye on for Maou's sake, lest Maou's thoughtlessness traumatize Chiho. But would “looking out for him” wind up making *her* the person acting weirdly, exposing it all?

Emi felt frozen in place. And while Akiko knew about Maou and Chiho, she didn't have all the facts. She didn't understand they were purposefully keeping some distance from each other. And given her personality, any lecturing she might give Maou about it would have little effect.

“...Why do I have to go out of my way to worry about the Devil King's personal life?”

The propellerlike motion of Emi's brain was frustrating her. Now she wasn't so sure why she hesitated to answer Akiko's question earlier. She, of all people, had no reason to consider this matter for even a moment:

What kind of chocolate would Maou like?

Thanks to that ridiculous thought crashing through her mind for a single instant, she had to deal with yet another wave of pointless anxiety. Neither she nor Maou had the wherewithal to address silly little events like that. She had a semiliteral *god* to defeat. Why did she have to get so worked up about some contrived Japanese custom like this? She had so many other things that required her attention.

Attempting to get her mind out of its current rut, Emi turned toward the restaurant entrance.

““ ...””

Akiko saw him at the same time she did. The sight made both of them visibly frown. Mitsuki Sarue, manager at the Hatagaya location of Sentucky Fried Chicken directly across the street, was passing by. His eyes, as he peered into the MgRonald dining room, were as pure as a child's, eyeing something he knew he could never attain. One look at them indicated to Emi and Akiko that his expectations for Valentine's Day were *way* off the charts.

He didn't venture inside, as he was busy with his own job at this time of day, but Emi and Akiko still exchanged glances with each other.

“...Akiko, did she tell you what to do if...something happened?”

“...All I know is, Kisaki won't be here on the fourteenth.”

“...No? He's gonna pitch a fit, isn't he?”

“...He hasn't done anything before, but we're supposed to call the police if that kind of thing happens.”

No matter how far-reaching and tragic their pasts were, Maou was currently the Devil King, and Sarue was an archangel. If Maou learned how preoccupied both he and Sarue were about something like Valentine's Day right now, the ancient Devil Overlord Satan would probably look for some shrub to weep behind—and Ignora, the “god” leading the angels, would probably call her whole mission off. It was a worthless thought, but it entertained Emi for a moment.

“You think he cares about this that much?”

“Hey, some people do.”

Whether male or female, this land of Japan seemed to all but force you to keep Valentine's in mind. It puzzled Emi. And while she hadn't heard anything from Chiho yet, if Chiho was expecting to enjoy this Valentine's Day, Emi hoped whatever was going to happen would send her heart soaring into the heavens, rather than crashing down to earth.

However...

This fleeing hope was crushed before Maou or Emi could do anything about it.

“Maou received some chocolate?”

“Uh-huh! It was the very expensive-looking chocolate, too! And the giver, she was pretty beautiful woman! This is the big problem, Chiho! It calls for the swift action!”

And at almost the same time as a wide-eyed Acieth blurted out the news to Chiho at Sasahata North High School’s front gate:

“I...I was too late...”

Chiho was surprised all over again by Suzuno crumpling to the ground, covered in sweat, a sleeping Alas Ramus on her back. And then:

“Sasachi, you...?”

Unfortunately for everyone involved, Chiho wasn’t the only person to hear Acieth’s report.

“You still haven’t settled things with that guy?!”

Kaori Shoji, who was about to walk home with Chiho, heard it all. And as she put it later, Chiho could barely stand to watch the mask of despair that descended upon Suzuno’s face.



Even after she learned the truth about Ignora, Suzuno Kamazuki retained her faith in a benevolent god. She was currently begging this god she held inside her for forgiveness.

“What, so you finally gave up, Sasachi?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“But it is *the* Maou! You know, Chiho, he is the easily manipulated!”

“That’s...well...not *untrue*, but...”

For whatever reason, Suzuno had taken Chiho, Acieth, and Chiho’s apparent classroom friend Kaori Shoji to the Sentucky Fried Chicken in Hatagaya.

“Didn’t you tell me before, Sasachi, that he’s got a lot more freedom in his life than you do? He’s busy with this training right now, and if he gets hired on full-time, he’s gonna start meeting all kinds of people, isn’t he? You don’t have any choice but to be a student for now—if you keep wasting time, you’re gonna be left in the dust, you know?”

“But we were on the same page back at Christmas...”

“You are the too gullible, Chiho! Kaori, she is correct! And maybe not right now, but as long as Ashiya is there, Maou only has so much of the time to return favor! You must take the brisk action!”

“Yeah, but what kind of action?”

Suzuno was curled up next to Chiho, still holding Alas Ramus. Acieth and Kaori—remarkably kindred spirits, considering this was their first meeting—were busy interrogating the poor teen in front of them.

“Acieth is right! You can cook, Sasachi. Just attack him with some homemade chocolate and beat an answer out of him! Ambush him when he’s done with his shift or whatever! It’s okay if it’s a few days before or after the fourteenth, besides!”

“Homemade, huh? I haven’t really done any confectionary work before.”

“Huh?! Chiho, you cannot make the sweets?! Me, I counting on you!”

“It’s not that I can’t... I mean, like, I haven’t made anything too fancy yet...”

“Then go buy a candy bar or a bag of chips from the convenience store! I’m telling you, you’ve had all these near misses—it’s time to put an end to it! You gotta start applying some pressure, lady!”

“Hmm...”

“Stand! Stand up, Chiho! Maou, we will wow him! Make him give you chocolate back for White Day!”

“I—I dunno if that’s really what I want...”

“...zzz...”

In front of Kaori, who presumably didn’t know what was going on with Ente

Isla, and Acieth, who could never lie or deceive anyone, Suzuno sat straining, sweat pouring out from her body as Alas Ramus kept sleeping in her arms.

Emi had been put in a similar situation at this same exact fast food joint in the past once. Her friend Rika Suzuki didn't know anything at the time; she was just curious to uncover the truth about Maou and Emi's relationship.



Ashiya's sudden intervention saved the day then, but Suzuno was still an unknown to Emi at the time; she must have been on pins and needles trying to keep her secrets away from Rika. Now, Suzuno couldn't help but feel Rika was paying the price for it.

Kaori knew nothing about Ente Isla, but she seemed fairly intimate with Chiho. Judging from the way she seemed to easily accept Acieth, Alas Ramus, and Suzuno—all three rather uncommon sights around the city—Chiho must have told her about them, in a nonincriminating fashion. That was Chiho's decision to make, and Suzuno didn't resent that, but the problem was Acieth. She had none of Ashiya's quick-wittedness, and her being around the same age (?) as Kaori meant they instantly got along. There was no telling when a slip of her tongue might arouse Kaori's suspicions. Plus, the guy running this place was still, in the end, Sariel. Considering his usual behavior, holding a conversation about Valentine's Day in here ran the considerable risk of making life miserable for Chiho, Emi, Maou, and everyone else at Sentucky and MgRonald in very short order.

With all this in mind, Suzuno was honestly scared out of her wits. But even though she was in the exact same position, Chiho seemed perfectly natural as she fended off Acieth's and Kaori's barrage of questions. Suzuno had chased down Acieth out of concern that Maou's lack of forward thinking would hurt Chiho yet again; now, her mind was filled with the single desire to make this situation a thing of the past as soon as possible.

"By the way, Suzuno, what do you really think of him? Maou, I mean."

"Hwah?!"

Kaori suddenly tossing the subject her way almost made Suzuno leap out of her seat.

"What do I...think? Think how?"

"Is he the type of guy who'd appreciate some homemade chocolate?"

"Ah, um, I wonder... I think he would appreciate most things edible, but, um..." She realized midway that wasn't what Kaori asked. "I mean, he isn't the kind of person to fail to notice the feelings behind a gift...I think."

“But then,” a dissatisfied-looking Kaori replied, “what about all the meals you’ve been preparing for him, Sasachi? Because I think you put a lot of feeling into those.”

Suzuno couldn’t help but feel like she was being assaulted. Maou never failed to thank Chiho for whatever she brought in, but nonetheless, Kaori wouldn’t be satisfied. Chiho, for her part, seemed to know that.

“It’s not really about that,” she said, backing up Suzuno more than Maou at the moment. “I did it because I wanted to have dinner with the whole gang.”

“But Maou being there wasn’t exactly a minor part of that decision, right?”

“Um... When you put it that way, then no, but...”

In the end, it was Suzuno who induced Chiho into providing that support. She had been serving consecrated food to the demons, hoping to sap them of their powers, and Chiho had stepped up to counteract that with her own cooking. It made it hard to comment on this line of questioning, even though it led (after a long, winding road) to things like Suzuno teaching Chiho how to cook and learning about Japanese and Earth cuisine herself. It built a relationship between them, and that relationship taught Suzuno how to understand Chiho’s thoughts on Maou. And now, despite the conflicts she felt about it, she had settled into a position of support for Chiho.

“I mean...”

“Hmm?”

“I think,” Chiho said, “I’ve been a little too selfish lately.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been so reserved up until now, so I guess I didn’t really know how I should break through that. And now I’ve caused all this trouble for you, Kao, and for Suzuno. Acieth, too, I guess.”

“Huh? You mean, this is the payoff for something?”

“Yeah.”

Acieth wouldn’t have known, but the night Rika tried and failed to make Ashiya her boyfriend, Chiho had taken a step forward thanks to the words

Acieth had given a confused Chiho inside Sasazuka Station. *So say the thing when you can, before you cannot say it anymore.* Chiho had “said the thing” long ago, and she had shown, through her behavior, that she still meant it. All that remained was to trust in him, and wait.

“I’m just thinking I should stop pestering him until next July.”

“Huh? Next July? That’s so arbitrary.”

“You—you will extend the Valentine’s until July?!”

Acieth was in her own dimension as usual. But Suzuno, knowing where the July deadline came from, turned her eyes down at the heavy child in her arms. The Obon Festival next July. The “birthday” of Alas Ramus, and the deadline Maou set for their journey to destroy heaven. To Maou, of course, defeating Ignora was a side quest; the main goal was to give Alas Ramus the best birthday she’d ever had, and Chiho agreed with him.

“So I mean, I’m just not sure I should worry about Valentine’s right now.”

““Whaaat?!””

Kaori and Acieth both lunged at her.

“What do you mean, you’re not sure?! Are you crazy, Sasachi?”

“Chiho, have you lost the mind?! You must give chocolate, or he no give you the chocolate back!”

They were criticizing her from two rather different vectors. Chiho raised both hands to calm them down.

“No, I mean, I’ll probably do something. Probably. But...Suzuno?”

“Hmm?”

“Have you seen Maou at his apartment lately?”

“Yes, I saw him as he left for work this morning.”

“I was just wondering, how’s his place looking these days? I feel like the fatigue’s getting to him lately.”

“I am not sure. We have said little but hello to each other as of late.”

Suzuno's schedule was structured more around Emi's than anyone else's, so she'd often not see anyone at all on the way back to Room 202.

At that point, Acieth spoke up. "Maou, he is the really, really tired. I know. He even said 'Oh, I'm sick of eating out anymore!'"

"He's sick of eating out?"

Chiho took a moment to ponder what this could mean. It didn't take long to glean something from it.

"Ah... Ohhh. Ashiya isn't there, so he has to deal with breakfast and dinner himself. I get it."

"Ch-Chiho?"

"And lunch is one thing, but I know he's been closing a lot of days lately. I don't know when he'll be home from training, so it's hard to drop in on him. I could leave something with Yusa, but it'd have to be on a day when they're both working."

"Um, Sasachi?"

"Hmm... Okay." Chiho's voice went flat. "Kao, Suzuno, Acieth... What do you think about me giving Maou a freeze-dried miso soup set for Valentine's Day?"

"""" ... """"

Suzuno's, Acieth's, and most of all, Kaori's faces told the whole story. Something was *wrong* with Chiho today.

"...Are you serious?"

"Huh? Kind of."

"This isn't a classroom party!!"

"Yeah, but if I want to bake him something homemade, I'll have to spend a lot of money buying good chocolate somewhere. If I'm gonna invest in that anyway, why don't I spend it on something he actually needs?"

"Um, Suzuno? From what I am discerning, Valentine's Day, it's that kind of thing, no?"

"I am impressed you are 'discerning' anything at the moment, but yes, I

agree.”

“You’re right,” Kaori said, “if this was for some normal day. But that’s not any different from the food you brought over before, is it? You know what I mean? Valentine’s Day is all about *chocolate*! Even if you wanna get creative about it, it’s *still* got to be something sweet!”

“I know. I know that...” Chiho sighed, shoulders drooping downward. “But I... I haven’t said this before, but I actually *have* been pressing Maou for an answer, a little.”

““Huh?!””

“Phew!”

Kaori and Suzuno opened their eyes wide. Acieth almost whistled her approval.

“Back when we all went to Nerima together...”

“Oh, back then?”

“So? So what did he say to you?!”

“Well... He *did* kind of give me an answer. He said he’ll tell me once he gets everything in order.”

“Huh?” Kaori gave her a stupefied tilt of the head. “That’s the same as just stringing it out some more. There’s nothing definite about it at all.”

“No, I guess not...” Chiho gave the group a half smile, a tad embarrassed. “But it feels to me like we set a new deadline, kind of. I feel like, if I give him some fancy chocolate right now, that’ll go beyond pressure and feel more like stress to him.”

Suzuno, of course, knew the truth lurking behind Chiho’s words. It kept her from saying *No, that’s not true* right now. Certainly, here was a man who knew Chiho’s feelings and was letting them float around aimlessly. Something needed to be done. But considering the enormous, complex issues Maou wrangled with, forcing him into a decision about Chiho felt like it’d bring nothing but bad repercussions.

“You...may be right.”

“Of course, if Acieth is telling the truth, that’s more stress for me, but...”

“Oh, it is no lie, I am the guaranteeing you of it! I saw Kusuda! She had the leer at him!”

“Acieth! You didn’t say that before!”

“Hmm... Kusuda... Hmm...”

Chiho’s face went blank for a moment. She shrugged, looking a little tired again.

“I didn’t mean to let Valentine’s Day go by without any comment. But looking at Maou right now, anything I do seems like pushing my emotions on him, or like it’d seem out of place right now. But I can’t just sit by and pretend this day doesn’t exist, so I thought over what I should do, and I didn’t have any bright ideas, so here I am. I mean...like, Yusa or Suzuno or Amane, or their landlord even—that’s one thing. But to get some chocolate from someone none of us even know?”

“Ahh... Um, well... True. Yes.”

Acieth described it as “expensive-looking” chocolate. But it wasn’t too long ago, Chiho felt, that Maou would’ve gone right to her for advice on what to do in social situations like these. It was exactly what Emi and Akiko thought, back at MgRonald, at almost the same time.

“I’m sure none of this would’ve happened if Alciel was around...”

Ashiya’s absence from Room 201 had caused Maou to become fatigued, oblivious, and open to attack. It made Suzuno wonder how the Devil King’s Army ever stayed together without him. No wonder Emi had plowed through them.

“Oh, right,” Kaori said, face brightening as she sat up. “Kisaki is the manager at MgRonald, right? Why don’t you have her mix it in with the rest of the chocolate getting passed around the staff? Just say it’d make things weird if you personally gave it to him.”

Chiho scowled. “We’re prohibited from giving out chocolate.”

“Huh? Why?”

“She told me herself; the crew can’t give chocolate to one another. Like, ‘If you wanna do it, do it in private,’ she said. I guess it causes problems.”

“Ohhh, I see. Maybe that’s what happens if you got a big staff like that. Hmm. What *should* you do? Are you really just gonna do nothing?”

“Honestly, part of me thinks that’s the best solution right now.”

“Mmmm... But... Mmmm.” Kaori seemed to understand Chiho but didn’t seem willing to accept it. “But it’s Valentine’s and everything. You can’t just... Oh!” She glanced at Suzuno, eyebrows raised. “You’re friends with Maou, right, Suzuno?”

“Excuse me?” Suzuno froze. “Um, well, who can say? I suppose we are rather close fr...*neighbors*.”

Suzuno had all but stopped bringing up the discord between humans and demons with Maou, unless she was deliberately trying to needle him. But being asked by an outside observer if they were “friends,” she found it hard to give an instant reply. To someone like Kaori, they were friends and/or neighbors, but she just couldn’t use that word, leading to an oddly ambivalent response.

“Well, if the workplace is a no-go, could we do a trade between close friends, and you can mix it in there?”

“W-Wait, Kaori, are—are you telling the rest of us to give Maou chocolate as well?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the only way to do it. Would you guys mind pitching in for Sasachi’s sake?”

“H-Hold on, Kao! What are you even asking from Suzuno?! Sh-she’s fine! This is all about my own stuff; I can’t put that on her shoulders!”

There was something very “teenager” about Kaori’s out-of-control suggestion. Chiho almost felt the need to apologize to Suzuno. Suzuno, meanwhile, was blushing ear to ear and staring at Kaori.

“M-Me? Give chocolate to him? Wh-what?”

“...Suzuno?”

“How could I look at him? What excuse could I give? And what would I give

him? Matcha powder? *Wasanbon* sugar? *Kuromitsu* syrup?!” Her eyes darted from person to person as she mumbled. “I—I am not sure about any of that! Perhaps, if it was seen as the polite, social thing to do, it would not seem unnatural... Would it? I did give him those udon noodles at first... Oh, but things are so different now!”

“Suzuno? Suzuno, you are the seriously worried? Why?”

“Ah!”

Acieth’s cold voice snapped her out of her stupor. Noticing the three pairs of eyes staring at her, Suzuno looked downward, face reddening again.

“I—I am sorry. I mean, something like Valentine’s... I have never done anything of the sort before. So...the idea of giving sweets to a member of the opposite sex...”

““Huhhh?!””

This came as a surprise to Chiho and Kaori. To the latter, someone as young-looking but mature as Suzuno having no experience with this was an honest surprise; to the former (although she never worried about it before), the thought of her never giving any man a gift in Ente Isla was beyond her wildest dreams. Chiho and Kaori weren’t so experienced that they had a right to look down on her, but Valentine’s was something you learned in preschool, really, or within your own family.

Suzuno used the hand that wasn’t supporting Alas Ramus to reach up and hide her watering eyes. “R-Regardless,” she said, voice low as she tried to defend herself against the two teens, “if I gave him sweets as well, that would be all the more unnatural. To Maou, I am, er, not at all the sort of person to do that. I think the camouflage would be all too obvious.”

“Then let me do it, too!” Acieth blurted out, whether she knew Suzuno’s feelings or not. Acieth, of course, wasn’t even hiding her desire to be showered in chocolate on White Day; it’d be much more natural for her to do the Valentine’s deed.

“Hmm... Sorry, Acieth, but I think it’d still be a little tough.”

Acieth’s presence still wouldn’t be enough to dull the impact of Chiho

presenting chocolate to Maou. To serve as camouflage, their gifts would need to be presented to Maou at the same time—but if Maou was in Sasazuka right now, he likely wouldn't return until late at night, and he'd be right back at work in the morning. Chiho's high school schedule kept her from visiting his home that late, and workplace chocolate was already deemed verboten. It was hard to picture a situation where both she and Acieth could give him a gift at the same time.

"So what're we gonna do?! It's like there's no way out!"

"Umm, well, if I can pair up with someone, I can do that," Chiho stated, "but now's not the right time for it, and I can't really expect someone to join me on this. I don't think we can do anything."

There was no answer they could ever reach. Beyond anything else, Chiho just didn't have the drive to push through this apparent impasse. The conversation was starting to visibly fizzle before their eyes.

"Nh...fwahhhh..."

Then, in Suzuno's lap, the napping Alas Ramus lifted her heavy eyelids open.

"Aw, cute!"

Kaori, seeing her awake for the first time, fawned on the awkwardly squirming toddler.

"Oh, Alas Ramus, are you awake?"

"Hahh... Suzu-Sisss... Goo' morrrning... Uh?"

As she sleepily greeted Suzuno, she turned and realized she was no longer where she was before she began her nap.

"Magrobad... No? Where aww-we?"

"Good morning, Alas Ramus! No, this isn't MgRonald. This is Sentucky."

"Snntuh-key?"

"That's right, Big Sis! The place evil, annoying angel runs!!"

""Uh, wa—!!""

Chiho and Suzuno panicked, as Acieth treated Alas Ramus the way she always

did. Fortunately, the novelty of a young child in front of her caused Kaori to pay it no mind.

“You’re so *cute*! Wow, and she’s so small, but she’s got a big vocabulary, huh? You guys are pretty far apart in age to be sisters, huh, Acieth?”

“Oh,” Acieth replied, “not as much as it looks.”

“...Whozzat?” Alas Ramus asked, a little suspicious at the unfamiliar face.

“Oh! Um, uh, hi, my name’s Kaori Shoji...”

Kaori found herself flustered, unsure how to deal with such a young child. Chiho deftly stepped in.

“Alas Ramus? This lady’s my friend. You can call her your big sis Kaori!”

“...Kao-Sis?”

“Oh, man, that is soooo cute! I’m about to have a nosebleed! I would totally wanna take care of this little girl if I knew her! Especially if this little angel calls me something like that!”

“My big sis is not angel, Kaori!”

Acieth had such an aversion to the word *angel* that she once again made Chiho’s and Suzuno’s hearts skip a beat. Kaori still didn’t notice.

“Aww, but Maou... I mean, I’ve only met him a few times, so I only kinda recall his face, but he’s got black hair, right? If they’re related, it must be a pretty distant relation, huh?”

“Y-yeah, I guess... Ha-ha-ha...”

“Distant? He is the dad of her, you can say.”

“Y-yeah! They’re so close, it’s almost like father and daughter!”

Again, Chiho and Suzuno scrambled to rein in the fallout from Acieth’s incessant bombshells.

“Father and daughter, huh...?”

Kaori, meanwhile, was too busy finding enlightenment about the joys of life to notice how unnatural all this talk was.

“K-Kao?”

“Sasachi, you know, I think I’ve found the most totally natural way to camouflage this ever...hee-hee-hee...”

“Kaori?”

“K-Kaori? What do you mean?”

“Okay, listen. Alas Ramus is related to Maou, but Yusa takes care of her, too. Acieth and Alas Ramus are sisters, and you and Suzuno are friends with all of them, Sasachi. Do I have all that right?”

“Y-yeah...”

“So far, yes...”

Chiho and Suzuno held their breath, dreading what could come next. Kaori grinned back at them.

“There’s only one way you all can give Maou chocolate!”

Then, she began laying out the plan—a plan that, when she heard it all, made Chiho seriously wonder why it never occurred to her.



“Alas Ramus making chocolates?!”

“Shhh! Please be a bit quieter, Emilia!”

Later, at seven that evening, Emi came to Room 202 to pick up Alas Ramus, only to find Suzuno looking notably more haggard than usual. The tale she had for her, of Acieth all but attacking Chiho at her high school, gave her a throbbing headache.

Thanks to that, not only had Chiho’s friend, Kaori Shoji, made contact with Alas Ramus, but she had also suggested a way to use the child to help give Valentine’s chocolate to Maou without applying undue pressure on him. As Kaori put it, making chocolate together with the little girl, who served as Maou’s “daughter,” would be acceptable enough to the guy without making it awkward. The whole story made Emi want to faint on the spot.

“Um, Bell?”

“Y-yes?”

“Looking back at everything...”

“Y-yes...”

Emi’s low voice seemed to echo like a demon’s.

“If we could’ve taken down Alciel, the whole Devil King’s Army would’ve crumbled by itself, wouldn’t it?”

“...Perhaps.”

“What is with the Devil King? I mean, seriously! Why is he just so...so incorrigible the moment Alciel is gone?!”

“I suppose the real mastermind was in the Room 201 kitchen the whole time.”

“Oh, this drives me up the wall! I was just telling Akiko at work a few hours ago that I hope Maou doesn’t get all weird talking with Chiho about the chocolate he got!”

“I—I suppose I am responsible in part for that...”

“It’s the Devil King’s fault for acting like such a freak in front of Acieth when he accepted that gift!”

“There—there was nothing freakish about it. As Acieth put it, he immediately realized it was merely a token of politeness...”

“Then why couldn’t he take care of it by himself instead of looking shocked and getting other people involved?!”

“That, um, well, yes...”

A valid point, Suzuno thought, even as she wondered why Emi was having such a mood-swingy day today.

“Suzu-Sis, Suzu-Sis!”

As her mother buried her head in her hands, Alas Ramus—playing around with a pile of books and magazines in one corner—tugged at Suzuno’s kimono, pointing at an open page.

“I—I like this!”

Whether she had understood their conversation or not, she had it open to a Valentine’s Day feature. It included a large picture of a “Tree of Love,” complete with colorful hearts as the fruit, apparently on sale at a famous chocolatier in the trendy Harajuku district of Tokyo.

“Nh...!”

Suzuno tensed up and closed the magazine before Emi could glance at it.

“A-Alas Ramus, that, um, that can wait until you are older. It, er, it is quite expensive.”

“Expensive?”

“Yes, expensive. All right? So be a good girl and do *not* show that to Mommy or Daddy, okay?”

“...Okeh!”

She didn’t seem totally convinced, but Alas Ramus still relented. Suzuno wiped the mental sweat away from her mind. The sight of that colorful chocolate tree reminded her a little too much of the Tree of Sephirot, and that could put pressure of a much different sort on Emi and Maou.

“So... All right. I mean, pressure or not, I can see that making chocolates with Alas Ramus isn’t a bad idea. But if we do that...” Emi balled her hands into fists, so hard that Suzuno worried her nails were breaking skin. “If we do that, it means I have to join them!!”

“I suppose so, yes,” Suzuno replied, averting her eyes. She couldn’t deny it. Even if Chiho wasn’t in the picture, if she was making a present for Daddy, Alas Ramus would naturally want Mommy to pitch in. But no matter how much their animosity had lessened over time, there was no way Emi would volunteer to join a gender-specific event featuring a man like that as a recipient of favors. However, once she calmed down from that first onrush of emotion, Emi’s voice took on a surprisingly calm demeanor.

“...And, you know, I was prepared to at least go through the motions with Valentine’s.”

“Oh?”

“Like, Christmas, New Year’s... Once we’re back in Ente Isla, Alas Ramus isn’t gonna experience any of that. Compared with that, there is a tradition kind of like Valentine’s Day over there. Plus, Alas Ramus even said she wanted to give Daddy some chocolate.”

“She did?”

“I kind of explained the custom to her.”

“You did?!”

This was a double surprise for Suzuno. The way this event worked, if Alas Ramus knew about it, Emi would naturally have to join in as well. But in terms of people both of them could logically give chocolate to, that was limited to Nord, Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara. Suzuno watched wide-eyed as a grinning Alas Ramus flipped through the pages of another Valentine’s Day chocolate catalog, before turning toward Emi.

“You were planning to give the Devil King a gift?”

“Well, Maou and everyone else in the Hatagaya location.”

But Kisaki, as she now explained to Suzuno, had put the kibosh on the tradition Emi had learned at the Dokodemo office.

“I feel bad for Chiho. I know she’s really serious about this. But if we could’ve just treated this as everyone having a little fun and trading a few goodies with one another, we could’ve done it without getting preoccupied with a bunch of crap. That’s why I thought I wouldn’t mind it too much.”

“But you can no longer camouflage it in the workplace, so since you taught the custom to Alas Ramus, you are forced, in a way, to follow it and give the chocolate yourself?”

“Well...yeah.” Emi’s voice was more halting now. “...I know it’s not my place to say it, but I’m in the same boat. I can’t have the Devil King think about a bunch of extraneous junk, so I thought some camouflage would be a good idea. Now, after today, I feel like everything I worried about is coming true.”

“Today, meaning the chocolate this Kusuda gave him in the training class?”

“Kusuda, huh? That was her name?”

Emi’s eyes grew a shade colder as she repeated it.

“You know how serious-minded the Devil King is.”

“Y-yes, I do.”

“So like... We aren’t at each other’s throats any longer, but if I give him some chocolate on Valentine’s, I thought he might start thinking a bunch of weird stuff again.”

“A bunch of weird stuff?”

“Um, how can I explain it? I think our relationship right now is kind of mercenary in nature. I owe him for this, he owes me for that, kind of thing. He wound up helping me when we got attacked in the subway, so I have to repay the favor, and so on. And I don’t mind that, but...”

Suzuno listened on silently as Emi attempted to summarize her feelings with a rapid barrage of words.

“But me personally giving him chocolate... It’s not like that other stuff. And maybe it’s just a polite custom, but I’m giving it to him as a way of expressing positive emotions, right? But I don’t have the confidence to dare to feel ‘positive’ about him, and I think that’s true for him, too. I can’t kill him anymore, and he knows that, but still...”

“Ooh?”

Emi pulled Alas Ramus (and her catalog) toward her, placing her on her lap.

“If I gave him something *this* amazing, I think that relationship is going to change, somehow.”

The child had the catalog open to a selection of offerings from Tokyo’s department-store bakeries, from well-known, showstopping pieces to more budget-friendly options for gifts given out of duty more than love.

“...Do you think so?”

“Probably, yeah,” nodded Emi, not looking too confident about it. “I don’t hate the Devil King any longer, you know. But I haven’t forgiven him. I know he

understands that. So..."

Turning the page, she came upon a feature showcasing recipes for making chocolate treats at home.

"So I don't think I need to buy him something cheap from the store, just for the show of it. I'm sure Alas Ramus wants to give him something, though, and if she wants to, I'll be glad to let her. But... I'm sorry to Chiho, but I want Alas Ramus cooking for her daddy to be separate from *her* thing. I'm kind of hoping she can find another way to 'camouflage' it, if that's what she wants."

"Emilia..."

"And she went on about not wanting to put pressure on the Devil King, but she really *does* need to gradually step up that pressure. Like, you know him. He really isn't thinking about it at all, because he assumes she'll let him off the hook until this battle is over. And then, when *this* comes along, I'm sure he'll be writhing and wailing about it again."

It sounded extremely likely to Suzuno.

"So if Chiho wants to give the Devil King chocolate, I think she could throw her honest feelings at him, like she always has. Oh, but..."

Emi looked up, chuckling.

"What does Chiho herself think? Does she want to go with Kaori's plan?"

"That...is a rather delicate question."

Chiho had been pretty enthusiastic at first, going all "Wow, yeah, you're right!" toward her friend. But:

"Has she contacted you about it at all, Emilia?"

"No."

Emi took her phone out, checking for new messages. There was nothing at all from Chiho.

"You think maybe she agreed to it as a way to gloss things over with a friend who doesn't know about Ente Isla?"

If Chiho wanted Alas Ramus's help with this, she would naturally have to get

Emi involved. But the way things stood, she'd likely hesitate to bring any Valentine's proposals to Emi's doorstep. The reason was simple: She didn't want her personal quest to make Maou clarify their relationship to trump the entire group's quest to storm the heavens and defeat Ignora.

"Devoting herself to the Devil King like this is such a waste of time."

"Indeed. I am with you on that."

"But it never runs on logic, does it? That kind of..."

...Love never does.

"...Hey, Bell?"

"Yes?"

"Have you ever been in love?"

"No." The reply came almost unnaturally fast.

Emi blinked in surprise. "No?"

"Well...not to sound lovelorn, but my family's position did not allow me my own choice when it came to partners, and there was never really a man who made me want to...push against them on that."

It made sense. Suzuno had led a hard life, in a way different from Emi. She didn't have any time to let herself get infatuated with some lofty ideal of love.

"What about you, Emilia?"

"Mm... Well, I... I think I may have."

"You think?"

"I'm just not sure you'd normally call it love. I'm talking about my father, after all."

"Oh." Suzuno laughed. "That would be different."

It was like a young child declaring to the family that she'd marry her father someday.

"I never had a mother, really, and whatever I did, I always had my father staying right behind me. So... I mean, someone who's strong, who's worth

relying on, and maybe who's got a screw loose sometimes, but who's always looking out for me..."

"...Wait. Emilia, do you mean..."

"No. No, not like that."

"Mommy?"

Emi buried her face behind Alas Ramus's head, hiding a smile that nobody else could see.

"But maybe so, if I could forgive him in my heart."

That was the truth, the purest words to ever come from her.

"...There's no point thinking about it. If Chiho wants to go with that plan, I'll consider it, then. I promised Eme and Al that I'd head over to them today, so unless something comes up, I won't even see Chiho until Valentine's Day itself."

"Ah, yes."

A little dumbfounded, Suzuno watched as Emi put down Alas Ramus and got to her feet.

"Are you staying in Sasazuka today, Bell?"

"I think so. Acieth kept me from working on my vegetable garden for long, so I would like to get it in decent shape first."

"All right. I need to return to Eifukucho and get my clothes and stuff in order before I go, so I'll head out for now. We're going home, Alas Ramus. Clean up your books, okay?"

"Okeh!"

At her order, Alas Ramus closed all the books she had strewn on the floor and stacked them up at the corner—her personal approach to cleanliness. Emi pulled her coat on, putting a wool cap on her child before turning to Suzuno again.

"Hey, Bell?"

"Hmm?"

“You cooked a lot of food for the demons with Chiho and Alciel, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Did the Devil King ever tell you what he likes foodwise?”

“Well, when we were conversing once, Chiho mentioned that, for all the scolding the Devil King gives Lucifer, their tastes are actually rather alike. They enjoy dishes with bold flavors: meat, carbohydrates, and the like. A very childish palate, to put it in a bad way. But he hardly shuns vegetables or fish, either. I would not call him a particularly picky eater, I suppose.”

“Hmm. What about sweet stuff?”

“I have not seen him have many, but when I had just arrived in Japan, Alciel mentioned using his rice cooker to bake a cake, and Chiho has delivered ice cream to their apartment before. He is familiar with the genre, at least.”

“All right. Thanks. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye-bye, Suzu-Sis!”

“Of course. Take care. You too, Alas Ramus.”

The two made sure their shoes were fully on before turning and waving. Suzuno heard their footsteps down the stairs outside as she stood up to lock the door.

“Hmm?”

Then, she stopped, gripped by the feeling that something was off.

“HmMMM?”

Did Emi say something odd just before leaving? Something she’d normally never say at all? Suzuno brooded over it, her head tilted to one side, but soon turned the latch on the door, failing to pinpoint what exactly bothered her. She looked at the clock. It was a bit early still, but she decided to get her things and head to the public bath.

“Oh...”

Then, she realized what had bothered her, and it brightened up her face. That was right—it was usually Chiho who worried about the demons’ food

preferences. This was the first time Emi had demonstrated any interest at all, so it had thrown Suzuno a bit.

“Of course, of course. That’s what it was.”

But then, the clear skies in Suzuno’s mind began to cloud up, turning into great, swirling, gray edifices that could start storming at any moment.

“Wait...”

Emi had wanted to know what Maou liked to eat.

“Waaaait...”

But what on earth for?

“Emilia?”

She called for her out loud, in the direction she’d walked off to, not really sure what to feel.

“Mommy, wait, wait! Too fast!”

Alas Ramus was pumping her legs at full speed to keep up with Emi, who was walking unusually briskly through the dark Sasazuka night. The pom-pom on her hat bounced around with each stride she took.

“Oh! I-I’m sorry.”

Emi, apparently having no idea she was going so quickly, stopped and turned around. Alas Ramus, maintaining her momentum, wound up running right into her leg, wrapping her arms around it.

“Mommy, *boom!*”

“Ahh! Oh, Alas Ramus, that’s dangerous!”

Emi laughed at the half-playing child. Then, the next question froze her.

“Mommy, you okeh? Your face’s all red.”

“...!”

She brought a hand to her face. It was a winter night. It’d be too cold to tell if it was “all red” just from touching it. Besides, she was under a streetlight. From Alas Ramus’s position, the glare shouldn’t have made it possible to see Emi’s

face. Maybe she was mistaken.

“Um, Alas Ramus?” she finally said, repeating those excuses in her mind.

“Yeh?”

“Alas Ramus, do you love Daddy?”

The young girl grinned, looking a little bashful.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! I wuv 'im!”

“...Oh.”

Emi nodded, lips pursed together...

“Ah! Mommy?”

...then she lowered Alas Ramus's hat over her face, before crouching down and embracing her.

“...Hey, Alas Ramus?”

“Waph!”

In a hug at such close range, the hat didn't keep the child from wrapping her arms around the smiling Emi's neck. Emi's face was blacked out by the glare from the lights.

“Daddy...”

Nobody would ever know what expression was on it.

“I wonder what kind of chocolate he'd like...?”



It was half past ten, and Maou's shift ended a bit before closing tonight. The sight of a light on in Room 202 made him raise an eyebrow.

“Whoa, Suzuno's still here tonight?”

It wasn't like Suzuno was up late so she could bother Maou, but knowing he wasn't the only person in this whole building was still a bit reassuring. So he climbed the outdoor stairs, going over the routine he had ahead of him before bedtime.

“You're back?” she asked.

“Agh!”

Suzuno popped out of the Room 202 door right as he got there. It startled him majorly.

“Wh-what?! What is it?!” he screeched.

“...”

But despite the sudden ambush, all she seemed interested in doing was silently staring at him.

“Suzuno?”

“I have a few things I wish to ask you...”

“Huh?”

“But could you please show a little more resolve? Like a Devil King?”

“What the heck?”

This wasn’t exactly the greatest way to be welcomed by your neighbor after a long evening shift.

“Silence. You are the one letting a little gift of chocolate rattle you to the core. The more you act like that, you realize, the more pain you put on others.”

“Wait a sec! Why do you know about that? ...Was it Emi, or Acieth?”

If Suzuno found out today—right after coming back from Ente Isla—it was either Emi, whom he told, or Acieth, who was there.

“Both. Acieth, in particular, ran us through the wringer.”

This was a double surprise to Maou.

“B-Both? Through the wringer? What did Acieth do...?”

“I no longer wish to talk about it. If you want to know, ask her yourself. Or Chiho.”

“Ngah!”

That was more of a noise than a coherent response. Why was Chiho’s name coming up?

“You...” Suzuno continued, uncorking everything she had bottled up upon a bewildered Maou. “What are you even doing? Because lately, I am having trouble surmising your motives. What are you thinking about, as you go on in life?”

“What am I *thinking* about? Why’re you lecturing me like Urushihara?”

“You may want to conquer the world as the Devil King. You may want a full-time job as a human being. I care not. But what is your name? *Devil King* or *Full-Time Employee*? Because if the demon Satan, or the human Sadao Maou, is neither Devil King *nor* salaried worker, what will you live for, then?”

Suzuno was being much harsher than usual.

“...Did something happen?”

“Nothing!” she all but cried out. This was clearly a lie, but Maou didn’t have it in him to pursue it. The buzzing of the nearly burned-out fluorescent light above them seemed like a roar to him.

“Look, Devil King.”

“...Mm?”

“I have no idea what the demon realm is like. I have no idea how you came to be the Devil King. But you have Alciel, you have Lucifer, you have Camio and the Malebranche; you have these massive hordes of demons following you, and you unified them all under your rule.”

“Yeah... Pretty much.”

“You became a king because you were stronger, more charming, and more magnanimous than any other candidate. Am I right? So would you mind showing me some of that magnanimity? Because as a Great Demon General, I find it difficult to respect my leader at the moment.”

“...You always bring that up only when it serves you, huh?”

“That is how you put it, but I only use a title when it needs using.” Suzuno gave him a vexed look as she clutched at her kimono sleeves with her cold, trembling fingers. “When my leader, the Devil King, is lost in life, I may wish to help him. But would you even listen to a human? A member of the

Reconciliation Panel? You would not, would you?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't..."

"So I have to be a Great Demon General, do I not? Because that is the only way I can serve you."

"Suzuno?"

Maou blinked. This was a lot of strange stuff she was saying. Suzuno, perhaps realizing this, brought her clenched hands up to her mouth.

"Re... Regardless."

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to tell you to get it together. That is all."

"Right. Um, thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

"...Good-bye, then."

Suzuno turned toward her room, in the dry air of the hallway.

"Uh, Suzuno?"

"What?" she said, stopping but not turning around.

"I know I'm in the doghouse already, but can I ask you something? Did Chi..."

"No."

".....Huh?"

"No, you *cannot* ask me something. I do not want to hear it. I do not wish to say anything irresponsible, and there is nothing I could say to you anyway. I lack the.....to do so. I do not wish to say anything careless."

"Wh-what? You lack the what?"

"If Chiho is an important person to you, then go find out for yourself. Farewell."

With that, she went back into Room 202 without awaiting a reply. Maou heard the latch locking, followed by empty silence, but he stayed in the hallway a while longer. She had mouthed off at him and left without letting him get a word in edgewise—but something must have happened today. Something that

drove her to wait around for him and say all that.

“...Ahhh.”

He scratched the side of his head, then slammed the Room 201 door behind him—attempting to calm his dispirited heart, but knowing full well that things had changed. That they couldn’t go back to how vague everything was before.

“.....Ahh.”

Suzuno crouched down on her side of the front door, unable to venture farther inside. Her light, hurried breaths, exhaled through her fingers, were turning white inside a room that had grown cold in the night.

“What a liar...”

Removing her hands from her face, she looked at her palms. Palms that were once stained in blood, in the name of her duties—but were now refined, pretty, bearing the smell of peaches from her hand soap. The kind of feminine hands you would see anywhere in Japan, or Earth, or Ente Isla.

“What a liar,” she whispered to herself again. “Do I need a reason to take a detour like this?”

No matter how cheap and thin the walls were in Villa Rosa Sasazuka, the sound of her voice would never leave the room. Then, as if to shake off all the weakness, she rocketed back up to a standing position.

“...What is so wrong about it?”

Tossing her sandals off, she stepped onto her tatami-mat floor, eyeing the pot on top of her oven burner. It was full of *nikujaga*, a hearty stew with meat and potatoes, and there was clearly too much of it for a single woman’s dinner.

“Who cares about beliefs? To hell with all of them.”

She reached out to turn the dial for the burner, then quickly removed her hand.

“All these lies, this dishonesty, this total lack of drive to surpass anyone...”

Suzuno put the lid back on the pot, then laid out a futon before unraveling her belt, changing into her *nemaki* pajamas, and snuggling in.

“And the worst thing of all,” she dryly whispered as she closed her eyes, “I have no right to criticize him. The Reconciliation Panel would have a field day with me.”

Then:

“Hmm?”

The phone next to her pillow chirped out a message notification. She picked it up. The name on the screen read “Shirou Ashiya.”

“Alciel?”

He was in Devil’s Castle at the moment. This was an Idea Link-based text. Suzuno opened it, suspecting a potential emergency, only to find something even more surprising.

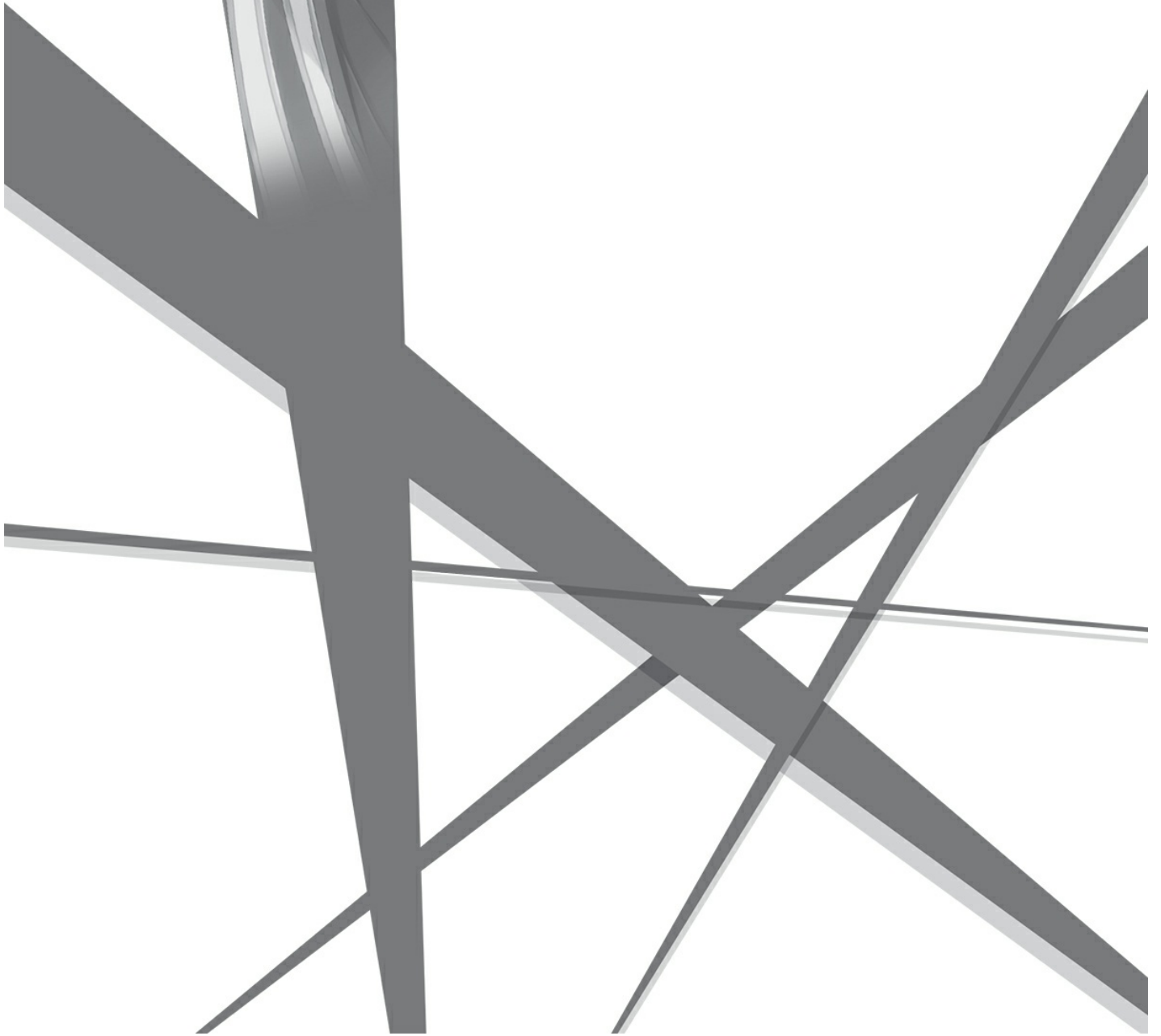
“We have located the Nothung and the Sorcery of the False Gold. Please contact me. I wish to discuss our search for the Astral Gem and recovery of the Spear of Adramelechinus.”

In relatively short order, they now had two of the four parts needed to turn Ente Isla’s Devil’s Castle into an interstellar ark to drive them to heaven. If two of the three relics they assumed were in the demon realm were already discovered, the third would no doubt come along soon after. The problem, then, became the Spear of Adramelechinus, the sole relic in human hands, and how to procure it in a peaceful manner.

“Hard to say if this is perfect or awful timing,” Suzuno said with a smile. “But this should amp things up a bit. For me, and for all of us.”

She texted out a quick acknowledgment before setting her phone on mute and gently shutting her eyes.

**THE
DEVIL
KING
AND
THE
HERO
DON'T
HAVE
VERY
MUCH
TO DO**



THE DEVIL KING AND THE HERO DON'T HAVE VERY MUCH TO DO

“It was common knowledge in the demon realm that the Spear of Adramelechinus is a weapon passed down from generation to generation in the Bluehorn clan, one of the realm’s most powerful families. As anyone who knows or has fought Adramelech knows, it was, like, huge. Incredibly long, even by demon standards.”

“Yeah, the handle alone was as thick as a support pillar in a castle.”

To any of the regulars at Room 201 in Villa Rosa Sasazuka, the conference of these two speakers would have been quite an unusual sight.

“The Bluehorns wield a lot of magic that works best with water and ice, and it’s said that spear has something to do with it. I guess that was the reason Adramelech was the demon-horde commander in the Northern Island, as water-rich and close to arctic climes as it is.”

“Makes sense to me. When Adramelech first took over the continent, we started seein’ these trees of ice dotted here and there. We called ’em ice-tree towers, but when I learned they were magical plants born from the demonic force Adramelech ran through underground springs to watch over us, I was pretty shocked.”

The scene was the general headquarters of the group known among its members as the United East-West Anti-Divinity Alliance, situated on Isla Centurum, the Central Continent—and when Suzuno returned there, upon hearing Ashiya’s news that two of their targets had been secured, the sight of Urushihara and Albert leading a strategy conference was so novel, it made regular novelty seem trite by comparison.

The sight of Urushihara—the model jobless slacker—assuming a leadership position in the force was like the extra-special secret sauce liberally sprinkled

over such a crazily novel sight. Neither Maou, nor Emi, nor Chiho were there. Ashiya was off on business in the Eastern Island, and Emeraldal had returned to Saint Aile for keeping matters on the Central Continent safe. Suzuno rued the fact that she had nobody to commiserate with about how bizarre this setup looked.

“But...yeah. When our little questing group defeated Adramelech, we kinda left the Spear to our friends in the Northern Island as a memorial present.”

“Right. Now, I’d like to make sure no one outside our group knows about our operation to invade heaven. We have Hazel Rumack conducting business for us in Saint Aile, but neither the emperor nor his administration are aware of this. If we have all those Northern Island dudes coming in to crash the party, it’s gonna be such a pain in the ass that I’ll want to throw in the towel right there.”

“Yes. So the first order of business is to discuss how we can swipe Adramelech’s relic from the Northern Island with as small a party as we can manage.”

The meeting, led by Urushihara and Albert, was attended by Suzuno, Rumack, Farfarello, Laila, and Nord.

“You described it as a ‘memorial present’ for the Northern forces,” Nord hesitantly said, being the most normal human being in the group. “So where is it right now?”

“I think this’ll be the easiest way to explain it,” Urushihara replied, taking out his familiar laptop. The screen showed a photograph of a town located in what looked like a range of high mountains. “I had Ciriatto from the Malebranche take these pics with Maou’s digital camera, and y’know, considering how he’s all claws and no, like, anything else, he’s pretty handy with that thing. Anyway, this is a shot of Phiyenci, which is the capital shared by the clans in the Northern Island. It’s nicknamed the ‘Goat Pasture.’”

The shot depicted a wide plain that was filled to the horizon with uniquely low-roofed brick buildings. In one corner was a wide-open space that took up about a fifth of the landscape, like a sports ground too big for its own good. In its middle stood a high, towering structure, apparently some kind of monument. With a tap of the keys, he switched to a close-up photo of this

edifice, revealing it to be some kind of giant metallic pillar.

“Look at that,” Rumack sighed as she looked at the high-resolution image. “Such an incredibly detailed depiction... I want this.”

“Don’t abuse it,” warned Albert, taking Rumack out of her reverie. She sat back up, straightening her posture.

“Dude, I’d be happy to show you a few models way faster than this pile of crap.”

Urushihara never missed a moment to slam Maou’s Luddite approach to electronic purchases.

“But anyway,” he continued, “I think these pics give us everything we need. It’s pretty clear, right? They put up the Spear of Adramelechinus in the middle of the Goat Pasture as a monument to symbolize the defeat of the Great Demon General of the North.”

It seemed like a natural, preplanned part of the Pasture, staring down with all its glory at the largest city in the Northern Island. The butt end of the Spear was buried in the ground, secured with something resembling cement around the base, and visitors could go right up to it if they wanted. It almost looked like a gravestone memorializing Adramelech, and judging by the people lazily picnicking and meeting up around the site, it was clearly a bit of a tourist attraction.

“So I guess you can tell,” concluded Urushihara, “that we can’t just take the Spear or ask for it or whatever, right?”

Suzuno, Rumack, and Nord nodded back.

The fact that the Northern Island, a geographically punishing land filled with innumerable races, ethnic groups, and clans, was heralded as the most peaceful of Ente Isla’s five continents was mainly thanks to Phiyenci, the Goat Pasture.

Every five years, the Island held a “zirga,” a large, united gathering of representatives from all the major players native to the land. On this occasion, they’d hold the election for the chief herder, the head of state for the entire Northern Island. This election took a good two weeks to carry out, and it turned the Goat Pasture into a huge festival, filled with the produce, culture, and

customs of people across the region.

The zirga was also an occasion for all the Mountain Corps, the elite fighters picked to defend the Northern Island, to assemble and (if necessary) hold combat games in order to solve deeper problems that no measure of discussion between clans could solve. This meant that the history of this land involved very few massive, blood-soaked wars; it also meant that the clans almost never dared to invade one another's territories. If the times called for it, all these clans could unite to form an astonishingly well-oiled machine of warfare, but in times of peace, it was much more of a "what's yours is yours, what's mine is mine" climate.

Thanks to this national character, the people's image of Adramelech fundamentally differed from the way other lands thought of their local Great Demon General.

"I mentioned this in passing to you a while ago, Bell, but seriously, Adramelech was *this* close to having the Northern Island welcome him with open arms," Urushihara volunteered.

"What? Why?" a surprised Rumack asked. When the Devil King's Army invaded the Western Island, she was vice-captain of the palace forces, only to have her land subjugated by the very slacker leading this meeting right now. Under Urushihara's, or Lucifer's, rule, the Western Island—while not as much of a mess as Malacoda's Southern Island—was not at all the well-oiled bureaucracy Alciel ran in the East, and the human casualties and chaos were at least as bad as anywhere else in the world. It was hard for Rumack to imagine that a Great Demon General nearly took over the North without a fight.

"Yeah, I guess you could say Adramelech's personality was a good fit for the Northern Island's people, hmm? In an understated way, he had a real human side to him."

"Hee-hee!"

Suzuno snickered a bit at this. She had heard it from him before.

"Once he disarmed the Mountain Corps and booted 'em from the island, he made the chief herder hold a zirga, where he talked about the policy behind his invasion and let the opposing clans have their say. Anyone who didn't go along

with the guy got slaughtered, of course, but he actually accepted some of their feedback, too. I dunno. Just the fact that he was open to talking at all, you know; that was enough for the folks up there.”

It wasn’t that anyone actively wanted the Devil King’s Army to be there, but compared with elsewhere, the people were more willing to accept a negotiated defeat.

“Kinda weird to think, though,” Urushihara went on. “Like, when I think of Adramelech, I picture this dude who couldn’t think his way out of a paper bag. I can’t believe he’d be crafty enough to try currying favor with humans.”

“Lucifer, can you shut up a sec? Rumack’s glaring at me.”

“Ow!”

Albert, much larger than the twiggy fallen angel, gave Urushihara a sharp elbow.

Here at this meeting, Rumack was the only person who actively saw Urushihara as a foe. Albert had only joined Emi’s quest after she had defeated Lucifer, but having him and Rumack—villain and victim—face-to-face made for a very delicate situation.

“Anyway,” Albert continued, “the problem is that Phiyenci, along with all the clans in the Northern Island, have accepted Adramelech’s occupation as part of their shared history. I’m from there, and since I helped Emilia beat ’im, that spear he left kinda symbolizes a turning point in that history, y’see? Defeat, followed by victory.”

“So you’re sayin’ they need it? That sucks. It’s kind of ours, dude.”

“Shut up, Lucifer.”

“Are you saying,” Suzuno ventured, “that you would not intervene with them for us, Albert? You don’t think they would give up the Spear?”

“It ain’t gonna happen,” came the point-blank reply from Albert. “Never in a million years. That’s why I got you all together here, ain’t it? Anything I’d try is gonna cause drama. If we really mess this up, we might wind up prodding the Southern Island, too.”

“...True,” Suzuno groaned.

Maou and Emi might have only been in this for Alas Ramus, but Rumack and the knights under her command had a clearer, more present reason—to defeat Ignora and avoid the potential destruction of Ente Isla’s humanity in the nearish future. But doing this involved finding the Noah Gears and launching Devil’s Castle into space, and the humans and the demons had to team up to achieve that. That was only possible thanks to Maou’s deep links to Rumack and Emeralda from the holy empire of Saint Aile, as well as Ashiya’s extremely personal relationship with Hu Shun-len, the Azure Emperor of Efzahan. Most other nations weren’t even aware of this operation, and for that matter, it had never been formally announced to the world that the Hero Emilia and the Devil King were even alive.

If this effort got out to the public, whatever the truth was behind it, everyone knew people would hear it as *Saint Aile’s Hazel Rumack and the Azure Emperor forged a secret pact with the demons* and run with that. It’d sow the seeds of suspicion all over the North and the South, as well as the smaller kingdoms in the West.

No one in this group had ever suggested that they should elicit support from other nations—this being a quest to save humanity, after all. The state of the Sephirah and Tree of Sephirot was something you really had to be close to Maou and Emi to fully grasp. In areas where Church influence was still weak, it’d take decades to even persuade people that Sephirot was connected to the holy force that ran the world. There was no way to convince everyone that teaming up with demons was the only thing to do, and no nation was about to sign off on a mission as daunting as “slaying a god.”

Without any real, visible danger like the Devil King’s Army coming their way, there wasn’t going to be any teamwork—the power struggles taking place within the Federated Order that was formed to rebuild the Central Continent made that clear enough. And these power struggles were laying themselves out like capillaries, along the lines of every political and economic issue facing every nation in the post-Devil King world, making the players ever greedier as they laid their cards down.

That was why Rumack, Emeralda, and the Azure Emperor decided to hurry

things along themselves instead. That would make everything go far, far smoother, and keeping it confidential would also put a lid on most of the ensuing power games. It meant a large, heavy burden for Saint Aile and Efzahan, but this burden was also an advantage—the ability to tackle this potential threat ahead of anyone else, a chance that far outclassed the potential losses that prodding the heavens and Sephirot might lead to. Saint Aile and Efzahan definitely had other motivations as well, but there was no doubting that this alliance was the smoothest way to handle this heavenly war.

And now, there was a thorny problem—or rather, a pointy one. Having the Spear of Adramelechinus inside Phiyenci, the shared capital of the Northern Island, presented numerous difficulties. It was physically and politically impossible to take the Spear without the common people knowing.

“Even if we negotiated with them,” Suzuno mused, “the question becomes who we would send. We would need Albert to bear the full brunt of responsibility, but he could hardly handle it by himself.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. Lemme make this clear: All right, my name’s a bit known around there as a heroic companion, ’n’ all that. But once I set foot back home, I’m my momma’s boy all over again, you know what I mean? I ain’t really got the clout to pull a bunch of clan chiefs my way. And this is Adramelech’s final relic! We’d have to get the chief herder involved, and by that point, there’s not much even Eme could do. In terms of overall balance, I’d say people like Rumack or Emilia are our best bets to contact them with.”

A chief herder didn’t have the absolute authority to (for example) give direct orders to all clans on the continent, but the leader’s words truly did have force behind them. Everyone knew the extent of the powers they wielded; they wouldn’t recommend someone apt to abuse them. Besides, however things worked inside the Island, if an outside visitor wanted to see the chief herder, they would still need an ambassador-level title if they expected an audience this lifetime.

“In that case,” Urushihara said, “let’s break out Emilia. If we explain things to her, I doubt she’s gonna say no.”

“No,” Rumack flatly replied. “If you’re considering her, go with me instead.

This way will take longer, but it'll save us trouble later. With Emilia, things would get too big, too fast. Depending on how the chief herder responds, it could turn into a fight for control of her, like in Efzahan. With me, if anything happens, Saint Aile can step up to put it out."

"Hold on," protested Albert. "If you're not on the scene here, it's gonna be hard to balance out the human side. Even if it's me, Eme, and Bell, we can't deal with Efzahan and the emperor leading them *that* well."

Suzuno sighed. "No matter what we do, we keep running into these stupid power struggles..."

The literal end of the world didn't mean political and monetary issues simply disappeared. Very little of Saint Aile's government—not even the imperial court itself—knew about this operation. If word got out, Emeralda and Rumack would get hauled in front of their parliament and probably banned from further participation. It'd also mean the Northern Island would become broadly aware of foreign elements from Saint Aile and Efzahan attempting to influence political matters in their homeland. Rumack's public presence in the Northern Island was thus unwise.

"Besides," Albert continued, "what do you think would happen if we sent Emilia up there? The Northern Island would welcome 'er, yeah, but to the Southern Island, we'd be a bunch of outcasts. All that stuff at Heavensky's been kept on the down-low, except for a few rumors here and there. All the world has so far are these sketchy tales of Emilia with nothing solid to back them up. If the Northern clans accept that she's alive, Emilia's never gonna have a calm day for the rest of her life. The fallout might even extend all the way to Japan, that other land."

"You humans are so meddlesome," noted Farfarello. "It is just as Lord Lucifer says. The Spear belongs to Lord Adramelech. If all you humans have to offer us are petty excuses, we demons can simply seize it any time we please, can we not? There is no need to burden your human nations any further beyond that."

"Right!" Urushihara gave the demon a sarcastic round of applause. "I was waiting to hear that, Farfarello."

Albert, on the other hand, gave him a rap on the head. "Hold it, you fool of a

Malebranche! Did you forget how you lost several generals out of your Efzahan volunteer army with that logic? If a cadre of demons attacks the Goat Pasture now, at a time of peace, you could wind up baiting the Federated Order into wiping out any demons left on this planet. If this castle here gets attacked, getting up to the moon's gonna be the least of our worries, let me tell you."

"Pfft. What is your bright idea, then? If we left matters to you humans, judging by this conversation, it sounds impossible to retrieve the Spear without any difficulty or loss of life."

Albert and Rumack winced. The demon was hitting them where it hurt.

"Yes, the demon realm has been racked with strife and disorder as of late, but now, we have banded under the banner of the Devil King, ready to follow his orders. You humans, meanwhile, are too obsessed over honor and greed to even care about the future of your descendants. I can hardly see how we'll kill any gods like this."

"Enough, Farfarello," Suzuno interjected. "If anything, this whole effort is a huge step forward for us."

"...Pfft."

The demon held his tongue. Suzuno was a Great Demon General, more or less, and he had some respect for that.

"Then how about this, Albert? I could work through the Reconciliation Panel and request that we borrow the Spear in order to investigate the remains of the Devil King's Army. We can return it once our battle is over, and I think if we give a bare minimum of explanation, the reaction should be rather more measured..."

"That could work, yeah. It'd get it in our hands, at least. But I guarantee ya someone from the North's gonna be with it the whole time. And how're we gonna explain it when it's people from the Central Continent hauling it off—not Sankt Ignoreido, headquarters of the Church? We can't casually say *Oh, we'll explain everything later once we give it back.*"

"...Yes. Good point. We *are* taking one of the island's most valuable assets."

"Yeah, and don't forget the other problem, Suzuno: Even if we manage to

make off with the Spear scot-free, someone from the North's gonna be looking over it. If they're good people, then great, but if they start carryin' on about what the Island or the clans get out of this, it's gonna blow up on us before we can launch the castle. The North and the West could wind up at war by the time we get back from the moon."

"Man, what a pain, dude," Urushihara grumbled. "So what can we even do, then?"

Albert was proving to have a knack for shooting down every suggestion from his companions. Everyone was starting to feel weary.

"Besides," Urushihara went on, "why do you have, like, so little influence in the Northern Island, Albert Ende? I mean, Emeralda Etuva's one thing, but a word or two from Emilia was all it took to get the head of Saint Aile's palace guard here on our side."

"Quit remindin' me," Albert groused resentfully. "Yeah, maybe I helped the Hero, but before then, remember how you whipped my ass and the asses of my whole Mountain Corps? Folks have long memories up there! And between all the stuff I've been doing for the West with Eme and the fight I had with ya, I ain't exactly on great terms with the clan chieftains at the moment, no. Plus, the current chief herder—Dhin Dhem Wurs is her name—she's the one who banded all the clans together when Adramelech took over and the one who slapped the demon's spear up as a monument. I just haven't helped out the North enough to ask her to borrow the Spear for—"

"Whoa. Albert?!"

"...Mm? What?"

It was Laila, who had taken a step back from the group and listened silently, who sent up the whoop of protest.

"Who did you say the chief herder was?"

"Huh?"

"You said it was Dhin Dhem Wurs?"

"Yeah..."

“The Dhin Dhem Wurs who was born from a side family of the Wurs clan? The youngest of eleven boys and girls, but so talented with a bow and arrow that the legends say she was born ‘with enough bows for the whole family’? The Dhin Dhem I know from the Wurs clan is small, pushy, and never one to humor fools...”

Albert opened his eyes wide. “What, you know the lady?”

Given the chief herder’s position as head of state, it wasn’t too unusual for someone to know her name and history. Laila went far beyond that.

“Dhin Dhem was the last person I gave a Yesod fragment to outside my husband and Emilia.”

“What?!”

“Huh?!”

“Whaaa?!”

Suzuno, Urushihara, and Albert understood the portent of that.

“This was a good sixty years ago! She still went by her childhood name of Lidem Wurs at the time.” Laila blinked a bit, not expecting all this attention. “Before my husband and Emilia, Dhin Dhem was the last of...what I suppose you could call *candidates* to be a Hero.”

She held her right hand out, palm down.

“Is that...a Yesod fragment? The cores for Emilia’s holy sword and the Cloth of the Dispeller?”

Rumack couldn’t help but nearly shout at the small, mesmerizing stone she had in her hand. Laila focused on it for a moment, and it began to faintly shine, then silently emit a purple light that extended out in a line pointing northward. She turned toward the ray of light, eyes closed, for a moment, then raised her face up as the beam disappeared.

“Albert... Rumack... Do you think things would be less complicated if I could speak with Dhin Dhem Wurs real quick?”

“Ah, ah, that...”

“Less complicated ain’t the half of it.”

Albert and Rumack exchanged looks with each other.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Go?”

“Yes,” declared the purple-haired angel. “To the chief herder. And don’t worry. She’d remember me. She is a kind person, more sensitive to the flow of earth and air than anyone in the Wurs clan. I’m sure she will hear us out.”



Suzuno was still anxious.

Back on Earth, Laila had the troubling habit of manipulating everyone around her and failing to wrap things up neatly at the end. It meant her claim of Chief Herder Dhin Dhem Wurs carrying a Yesod fragment seemed implausible at best—and even if it was true, Suzuno wasn’t sure the head of state would remember Laila after six decades.

But the moment they all stepped out from the Gate in the main Church cathedral in Phiyenci, she discovered a group of large, muscular men in the Northern Island’s colorful garb waiting to greet them. Or Laila, really. It surprised her a little.

“Which one of you is Lady Laila?”

Four of them had taken the trip to Phiyenci—Laila, Albert, Rumack, and Suzuno. Before any of them could speak, one of the men was asking for Laila by name, eyeing the three women in the group.

“I am.”

Laila took a step forward. The man looked at her, confused.

“I understood that Lady Laila had silver hair with a twinge of blue to it.”

“Well, after sixty years, a woman will want to change her hair color sometimes.”

“...!”

After the fracas on the Fukutoshin subway line, Maou’s magical force had

healed Laila, giving her hair the purple tint it still had today. She claimed she could reverse the dye job if she wanted, but it was a pain, and she didn't like her original color that much anyway, so she kept it.

The excessively casual nature of their exchange made Suzuno internally sweat a little, but the man looked only a tad let down. "I see," he said. "I suppose you *are* the woman I heard about."

"How did Dhin Dhem Wurs describe me?"

"She described you," the envoy immediately replied, "as 'a handful.'"

"I see the years haven't dulled her tongue at all," Laila said with a smile. It was not met by the envoy, who spun around and motioned for the quartet to follow him.

"Come this way, please. The chief herder is waiting for you."

The other three in the group meekly followed the order, all of them unsure what Laila and the man's banter meant for them.

Phiyenci, it turned out, was wholly deserving of its nickname.

The Goat Pasture was filled with countless examples of the animal, in all shapes and sizes. Many were on sale in the market streets for their fur, milk, or meat, while others, large enough to give an adult horse or cow a run for its money, were pulling carts and transport wagons. Young girls, clad in the traditionally colorful, natural-dyed wear that was a trademark of most mountain people, even had baby goats tagging along with them like dogs or cats, which was the most darling thing ever.

This city was around three thousand feet above sea level, resulting in thinner air and lower temperatures. Given the lack of flat land to build on, Phiyenci was relatively crammed with people; as Albert explained, the port town on the continent's southern tip was much larger and more commercially active. Still, the zirga had never moved from here in all its years. Every road and back alley was well paved, and the current Mountain Corps kept the order in every corner of the city. Diplomatic missions from nations in other continents were dotted around town, affirming its position as the nerve center of the Northern Island.

Suzuno, Laila, and Rumack had all come prepared with heavier outfits to deal

with the cold, but Albert was in his same old leather jacket. Phiyenci was where people from every clan in the island gathered, and they could see a vast variety of ethnic groups running up and down the streets. One would expect a lot of people who looked like Albert, dark-skinned with white hair, but some from the northern reaches boasted lily-white skin and golden hair instead, while others looked little different from the average Efsahanian—perhaps some Eastern blood had mixed in at one point.

The one thing that united them—and made them all eye-catching—was the flashy, colorful clothing. Only a very small handful took Albert's approach and went with all black. Some used almost every color in the rainbow, while others dressed in nothing but red or orange (the color of their clan, perhaps?). Every clan seemed to have their own style, color selection, and materials; it almost seemed like too much of a jumble for a city meant to be the capital of the continent, but it certainly offered insights into the character of the Northern Island—a gigantic federation with hundreds of clans that somehow found a way to all get along.

Suzuno and Rumack paid it no special mind, both having been to Phiyenci on official business several times. But considering how their envoy was taking Laila to the chief herder, it seemed strange how he was sticking to the city's busiest business streets.

Their destination, in the end, was even more confusing. "Um, is this it?" Albert asked, unable to contain his curiosity. They had walked for less than twenty minutes from the cathedral, only to stop at a place not at all grand or lofty. In short, it was a cheap restaurant selling goat meat cooked on an iron plate, the kind of place you'd see everywhere in town.

"Sir Albert Ende Ranga," the man said, turning toward him.

"Ranga" was Albert's clan name, one he was forced to abandon after Adramelech defeated his Mountain Corps force.

He continued, "The chief wishes to treat you to a grand meal."

"...!"

Albert froze for a moment, not expecting this.

“My lady wishes for our visitors from the West to enjoy this as well. She has been a fan of this establishment since a young age. She has reserved the entire dining room for the afternoon, so please, make yourselves at home.”

And with that, the man walked away and into the crowds, not even bothering to open the door for them.

The four of them gave one another quizzical looks, before Laila decided to take the lead. “Let’s go in,” she said, pulling the door open. Inside, they found your typical restaurant space—a few chair-lined tables, all in the traditional Northern Island style. A more formal room lay beyond, its floors lined with woven mats; in the middle of it was a sunken fireplace that guests were meant to sit around.

“Come in already! It’s too damned cold outside!”

The voice came from the other side of the hearth, as far away from the entrance as possible.

“?!”

Suzuno was the only one to pick up on who it was.

“I’m getting on in years, y’understand! This weather is killer on my knees! Get yourselves in here!”

The nasal griping reeled them all inside, Laila taking the lead as they walked toward the rear. There, they found a small, elderly woman using a wooden spatula to mix some meat and vegetables on the iron plate above the sunken hearth, adding in sauce of a shade Suzuno had never seen before.

“It’s been a while, eh? I was surprised to hear you’d become chief herder.”

Laila casually greeted the stern-looking woman. It made the spatula stop in place over the vegetables.

“I certainly can’t call you ‘Lidem’ any longer.”

“Anyone who called me *that* has been feedin’ the grass and plants from six feet under for years! They’re probably all mountain-deer droppings by now!”

The small head, covered in a multihued wool cap, was thrown upward, a pair of eyes looking up at the transfixed pair.

“I”

Suzuno gasped at the power behind those eyes. Was *this* Dhin Dhem Wurs—this old woman with a jeweled monocle, small and bent over even when seated?

“What, didn’t you know that Dhin Dhem Wurs was this old lady with one foot in the grave?”

The woman who Laila had called Lidem, seeing through Suzuno’s trepidation, half lunged at her.

“Who’re you, then? Some young up-and-comer in the Church, if I had to guess. Now how are you gonna climb through the ranks if one glare from an old lady like me makes you ruin your garments?”

“Ah, n-no, I...”

“Laila! How could you be so impolite, so careless, so silent for so long?! I’m sure you got reasons for showing up in my life right when I’m old and decrepit, don’t you?! And yet, you’re just as much a young fashion maven as ever! You could at least look like a forgotten retiree like me!”

“I’m trying to look as plain as I can. Your hat’s a lot prettier than anything I’m wearing, Lidem.”

“Of course it is! The youngest daughter of my third son knitted it for me, back when she was little. It’s the best you’ll ever find!”

The old woman began mixing up the food on the plate again, suddenly remembering why she was here.

“So! Hazel!”

“Y-yes?!”

The woman’s eyes were on Rumack now. “You’re still single, aren’tcha? Maybe you think you’ll be young forever, but lemme tell *you*! Between how you are and how *I* am, it’s all in the blink of an eye, my friend! We don’t have all the time in the world, you know, unlike that debauched, color-blind angel over there! Get yourself a man and settle down already!”

It was like Wurs was the head of the Federated Order of the Five Continents’

nagging grandmother. The two of them knowing each other was no great surprise, but this wasn't the kind of conversation two political figures like this would ever normally have.

"Ah, but keep your hands off that fool, the crown prince of Saint Aile! He'd be such a waste for a smart cookie like you! I tell you, that brat hasn't gotten any more brains since he was a baby!"

"Um..."

She certainly wasn't pulling any punches. It was an almost treasonous way to describe the next emperor of Saint Aile.

"Mark my words, you'll never find any decent men in the West. I can see *that* much over in Sankt Ignoreido. They act sooo high-and-mighty, like *oh, I have nothing but a chair, a desk, and my scriptures at home*, but once they get old, all they do is compete to see which of 'em can pile up more gold and jewels in their vaults! I tell you, women like you gotta kick their no-good behinds outta there before it gets even worse! You hear me?!"

"Y-yes...?"

The target of her ire had switched back to Suzuno midway. Suzuno could do little but squawk awkwardly.

"And *you*, Ranga!"

But she saved Albert for the end. Wurs picked up an earthenware plate and a pair of chopsticks, using the spatula to shovel the meat onto the dish, then shoved it in Albert's face.

"Here."

"Uhh..."

"Here! Try it for me!"

"Um, okay..."

Albert, completely floored by the presence exuded by a woman less than half his height, reached out to take it.

"Did your mother teach you to eat standing up? Get in here and sit down!!"

“Y-yes, Chief!”

Cowed by the nasal voice, Albert quickly sat by the hearth. Suzuno could barely keep up with this torrent of events, but Albert did his best, gingerly taking the meat-laden plate and the wood-hewn chopsticks. Wurs jerked her head forward, motioning at him to eat up. Unable to say no to the lord of every clan in the Northern Island, he took in a mouthful of the steaming meat.

“How is it? You’re trying it for me, so you gotta say what you think of it.”

“...Um.”

Albert was just as confused as everyone else. This was the chief herder, the head of state in the Northern Island. And although he led the Mountain Corps at one point, Albert had exchanged only a few words with Dhin Dhem Wurs in his life. The Wurs and Ranga clans were far removed from each other on the social ladder, and in terms of their standings within their respective families—one way people up north judged each other—the pair couldn’t be further apart. But she wanted his opinion, and he needed to give it.

“It’s good. Really takes me back. It’s a lot like what my grandma cooked for me as a kid.”

“It is?” Albert’s whisper didn’t move Wurs an inch. Then, as flatly as ever:

“I’ve put you through a lot, haven’t I.”

Albert took a moment to chew over the observation before quickly replying:

“...Well, it’s resulted in a lot of good memories.”

“No, no, go ahead. Badmouth me a little.”

“Hey, I’m a grown man. If my friends here saw me crying into the shoulder of someone old enough to be my grandma, I’d never live it down.”

“Hmph. That’s not very nice... And by the way, how long are you bums gonna be standing there? Sit the heck down!”

“Y-yes, Chief!”

“Er, do please excuse me.”

“I would be glad to.”

At the old lady's orders, Suzuno sat politely on her knees by the fireplace; Rumack attempted to but gave up and crossed her legs; and Laila casually flopped on the floor.

"Hohh! So you're the Scythe of Death, eh? I figured you'd be some sly, stealthy old lady, but you're still a young lass!"

"A young... Ah, um, Chief Wurs, I am..."

The preparation might be a bit different, but the results were pretty similar to what you'd get visiting a Mongolian barbecue place and going heavy on the spice. Suzuno was the only unfamiliar face to the chief herder, and it was only when she introduced herself that Dhin Dhem Wurs realized she carried out "holy work" for the Council of Inquisitors.

"Listen, you eatin' okay, young lady? I bet you ain't. That's why you're all stumpy like that! You're too busy doing a bunch of fuddy-duddy Church work to eat right!"

"St-stumpy...?!"

Suzuno took harsh criticism of the Church in stride at this point, but being called "stumpy" to her face made it hard to hide her shock.

"Lidem," Laila said, "Bell here is a very talented cook. I've enjoyed her food several times."

"Hah! Look at you! You couldn't even drain the blood from a goat carcass without almost fainting! Some angel you are! Now, come on! If you stay all thin like that, you'll turn into an ugly old Grim Reaper! Eat up! The meat, too, the meat!"

"Ah, ahhhh, um, I have more than enough here...!"

Suzuno could only stammer as a small mountain of goat meat ("the best part!") rose up from her plate.

"What're you talking about? You've eaten the least out of all of us! You still look like a little girl because you're skimping on the meat and fish, I tell you! Look at that midget of a court sorcerer on Saint Aile's payroll! She's living the high noble life and eating sweets all day, so she's gonna be shrumpy her whole

life! Just you watch! In a few years, she's gonna plump up like a balloon!"

Suzuno winced at the pile of meat, more than enough to give anyone heartburn. Wurs was too busy berating the eating habits of Emeralda, a woman she couldn't have possibly had a connection to, to care. Suzuno was at the end of her rope.

"And Hazel!"

"Y-yes!"

"You, on the other hand; you're not a young lass any longer! You need to pick a drink and stick to it! The booze out west is all too sticky-sweet for me! Listen, lemme get some fresh fermented goat's-milk liquor sent to you soon! If you wanna drink, that'll be a lifelong friend to you, stick to that!"

"I... I can't say I like the fermented milk beverages of the North very much..."

"Well, if you keep drinking what you got now, you'll wind up with a big ol' wine-barrel belly like your emperor! You better lay off the grape and mead and spirits before they stick you up on a shelf in the cellar!"

"Hee-hee-hee! But Lidem, I remember your clan chief being livid with you after you stole some of that fermented milk and got cross-eyed drunk off it."

"Of course I did! When you're a young Wurs, you gotta learn the difference between good and bad drink, or you'll never be a grown-up. But look at you, Laila! It's been sixty years! Have you learned how to keep your place clean yet? Don't forget, the only reason they found out I stole that drink was because you lost the bottle I used to sneak it out!"



“Whoa, whoa, Lidem...!”

“Hmph! Judging by the body language from Stumpy Scythe over there, I’m assuming you’re as slobby as ever, huh?”

“St... St-Stumpy Scythe?! *Stumpy* Scythe... That, really, that is just...”

Suzuno knew that Wurs was only making fun of her *nom de guerre*, but her Japanese sensibilities told her that “Stumpy Scythe” sounded suspiciously like some cutesy character with its own cartoon and merchandising line. She cursed her body as she began stress-eating the meat on her plate.

Dhin Dhem Wurs’s meddling and wheedling continued on for a considerable time to come, draining the energy from Suzuno and Rumack by the time all the food and veggies were cleaned from the griddle.

“Oh, and *also*, I had some ground-meat sandwiches made for you, so take them home with you, all right? You need to eat healthy, you hear me, Stumpy Scythe? You too, Hazel!”

““Yes, Chief...””

An afternoon spent slamming the younger generation made Dhin Dhem Wurs extremely self-satisfied. Adjusting her monocle, she turned to Laila.

“So what did you need? Lighting that up out of nowhere...”

“Oh, now you ask?”

Albert barely had enough breath in him to snap back, his stomach full to the point of bursting.

“Because you know, you gave that thing to me, then made me keep it on hand for the next sixty years without explanation.”

The eye—or, that is, the monocle—she had pointed straight at Albert was festooned with a litany of fancy-looking jewels. It seemed like just the kind of garish fashion choice a woman like Wurs would enjoy. But it was only at this point that Suzuno and Albert spotted the light from one of the purplish jewels on the frame.

“You’ve been taking good care of it, I see.”

“Well, of course I have. It’s thanks to this thing that I’ve stayed chief herder all these years. It’s the only thing I have you to thank for over the past sixty years, let me tell you. But you know...”

The eye on the other side of the lens glared at Laila.

“Here we are, this ‘world-class danger’ you told me about, and now I’m too damned old to do anything about it, aren’t I? I can barely lift up a bow any longer. I had to force Adramelech’s army on that kid Ranga instead.”

“That... Well, yes. I suppose I can’t blame you for seeing it that way. But Lidem, the real danger wasn’t the Devil King’s Army. It’s coming for us right now.”

“Oh?”

Wurs kept her eye on Laila, long enough for Suzuno to realize it was a Yesod fragment that was glowing on the monocle.

“I suppose you aren’t lying, are you?”

“Of course not.”

“But perhaps it’s not true, and you just believe it is, is all.”

“Oh, I assure you, it is. I was one of its causes, besides.”

“Ohhh? And that isn’t a lie, either. So you came over here for the first time in sixty years to tell me that? I can’t wait to see what you’re gonna order me to do next.”

It seemed easy for Wurs to sense whether Laila was telling the truth. She didn’t even bother to consult Albert about it.

“In that case, let me cut to the chase. We need to borrow the magical spear the Great Demon General Adramelech left behind. I’d like to have it taken to the Central Continent, and if possible, I don’t want anyone besides you to know what we’ll use it for.”

For the first time this afternoon, Suzuno noticed Wurs change her expression.

“You’re serious?”

First, it was surprise. Then, exasperation.

“Don’t give me that nonsense. You know I could never do that.”

“If you don’t, the human race is going to die out.”

“Oh, so it’s war? And if Hazel and Stumpy Scythe are here, the West must be involved, eh? If you want it, pry it out of our hands. Otherwise, you can’t have it.”

“Please, Lidem! Stop acting like a warlord! This is crucial!”

“Shut up, you slope-headed angel! If I gave you that spear without hearing the reason for it just because I knew you as a kid, I’d have every clan beating the crap out of me! They’d strip my title on the spot! So get out of here before I grind you all up and turn you into stuffing for smoked goat’s intestines!”

“Lidem! Please! It’s important!”

“Ugh, this is ridiculous! You never did think anything through, and you still don’t! Look, whether the world’s ending tomorrow or not, there’re some lines you can’t cross! Now get out of my sight! Ranga! Take this bum back to the West for me, now!”

“Lidemmmm! At least hear me out!”

Laila pleaded like a little girl begging for candy. There was no one else in the restaurant, but it still looked absolutely pathetic.

“You don’t have a single thought in your mind, do you?” admonished Rumack.

Suzuno nodded. “And here I thought we could rely on Laila at least a little bit. I see my eyes have deceived me.”

“Now I can see why people don’t want to believe in gods and angels, huh, Stum—er, Crestia...?”

“General Rumack! You were about to call me ‘Stumpy Scythe’ just now! You were this close!”

“I—I was not! I didn’t say it! I stopped midway!”

“Yes, you stopped because you *were* saying it! I am filing a formal complaint with the Devil King’s Army!”

“What, not the Church?! What’s happened to you?!”

Suzuno teared up a bit, cheeks reddened, as she whined at Rumack, a woman a good head taller than her and more fully developed in pretty much every other way. Rumack did everything she could to defend herself. And Albert, the only man in the room, watched this fruitless argument between two of the highest-ranked women in the world and sighed.

“...Can I go home yet?”



“All right. I think I get the picture. You’re gonna go shoot a firecracker at the moon, huh?”

The concept was massive enough to make any Ente Islan’s head swim, but Dhin Dhem Wurs didn’t bat an eye as she took it in.

“Laila,” she said, turning toward her, “I think I *do* need to compliment you about just one thing here.”

The chief herder supported her head with one hand. They had spent the ensuing hour keeping warm around the fireplace, the iron griddle trundled away now.

“What’s that?”

“The way you brought Ranga, Hazel, and Stumpy over. If you had come by yourself, I would’ve taken this as the West wanting the Spear for itself. By the next evening, I would’ve warned every clan about those spear thieves, it would’ve killed relations between the North and the West, and Hazel probably would’ve lost her post.”

““ ...””

Laila and Rumack went pale, each for different reasons.

“Still, this is a thorny problem...” Her eyebrows bunched downward as she looked at Albert. “The amount of holy force contained in Sankt Ignoreido’s holy water has gone down by half in five years? You sure the groundwater hasn’t changed routes due to a cave-in or something?”

“Yes. They worked in tandem with the Holy Magic Administrative Institute in Saint Aile to get those results. There’s virtually no mistaking it.”

“Huh. So the Church worked with the Institute after trying their boss for apostasy or whatever? That little broccoli-haired girl? I suppose I can trust in that, yes.”

““Bphht!””

Albert and Rumack laughed at the same time. The nickname wasn't new to them.

“Wasn't there infighting between the Institute and Stumpy's group, too?”

“...No,” Suzuno replied, wrinkling her nose at her own nickname. “I was out on completely different business. I have simply built a close personal relationship with Emeralda.”

It was a surprise to her, seeing how Wurs seemed to have her finger on everything going on in the world from this restaurant in the North Island. It would not be wise to defy her, Suzuno thought, just because she gave people offensive nicknames.

“Hohh. So a Church inquisitor and the head of Saint Aile's Holy Magic Administrative Institute? Strange bedfellows, I'd call that. I didn't think they'd work as closely as the Church's diplomatic mission and Saint Aile's administration would—on the surface, at least.”

“Call it strange,” Suzuno replied, “call it what you will.”

“...I see.” Wurs gave her a wry grin as her gaze shifted to Albert and Rumack. “I should have known the moment I saw Death Scythe walking around with Hazel Rumack. I'm going senile, I suppose. Hey! Ranga!”

She took a pipe and a box of tobacco out of her pocket, crushing some leaves in her hand as she pushed them into some charcoal. She put this mixture into her pipe, quickly smoking in peace.

“Is Emilia well?”

“...”

Albert didn't answer. But Dhin Dhem Wurs laughed anyway, the light glinting off her monocle.

“I see! I heard she died fighting the Devil King Satan, but... Well, well! I

suppose the rumors of her being around when old man Hu from the East got his palace wrecked were true, then. Phew...”

She took two or three puffs, rather rudely using the edge of the fireplace to tap her pipe. The rapping brought Laila back to attention as Wurs stared at her.

“What’s she to you?”

“What...?”

“Ranga fought alongside Emilia. That I know. Hazel was probably her legal guardian or something. And Stumpy Scythe, since she works under Olba, I can get. But what connects *you* to Emilia? And more than that, Laila—I don’t think Emilia’s anything like the girl you hope she is.”

“...What do you mean?”

There was a touch of resentment to Laila’s voice.

“Exactly what I said. Certainly, she must be a good fighter—good enough to beat Lucifer and Adramelech. But she’s this sheltered little girl. She’s got guts, yeah, but without Ranga, Olba, and Li’l Broccoli, she couldn’t succeed on this adventure. She may be the Hero of the Holy Sword or whatever, but I don’t see why you’d give her something like this.”

She fussed around with her monocle a bit.

“If I could ask,” Suzuno interjected, “what do you use your fragment for, Chief?”

It struck Suzuno just now that the powers of the fragments she had seen didn’t follow any discernible pattern. Emi’s sword and armor seemed to pop right out of her fragment, but the one Alas Ramus had in her forehead didn’t demonstrate anything like that. She saw how fragments could cast beams of light between one another, but with Wurs, it seemed like Laila was using it to communicate with her in some way, too. That was the only way she could send an envoy to the cathedral to greet them, despite receiving no advance notice.

But Wurs simply glared at her. “You think this chief’s going to reveal her hand to the West so easily?” She turned back to Laila. “I don’t know how many people you’ve been tossing these fragments around to, but if all you guys are

covering for Emilia, then what are you doing here, Laila?"

"There's nothing strange about it," Laila replied, head held up high. "Emilia's my daughter."

".....Your what?"

For once in her life, Wurs's jaw actually dropped.

"What's so strange about a mother working for her daughter's future?"

"Your daughter? Emilia?"

"Yes."

"This... Hoo. *That* is something. I can't even remember the last time I was this shocked. I can hardly believe my ears. Well! Hmm. You're the mother, eh? My, my, my..."

She opened her eyes wide, as wide as her wrinkled body would allow, and looked around the fireplace.

"You must be a real handful for your husband, eh?!"

"Lidem! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like, ka-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The chief knew exactly how Laila would respond to this.

"But... Hmm. Now I understand. I think I'll trust in all of you, then. But as you probably realize, whether I give you that spear or not's a whole other question. And I guess I see why it's bad if the world knows Emilia is alive, but wouldn't all this be a *lot* easier if she got involved?"

"We can't have that happen. For Emilia's sake."

"Yes, Hazel, I can see how you feel. But that's just a small sacrifice for the greater good. Emilia's not the type to go around calling herself a hero on a whim. It's not right to be so protective of her that other people's lives and honor play second fiddle."

This argument was perfectly valid, of course. But it made Rumack visibly dour.

"I don't see," she muttered, "how Northerners who pushed everything on

Albert Ende and curled up in their shells can tell us what's right or not."

"Rumack..."

"Silence, Albert. This is the kind of 'pain' she was talking about with you, huh?" Rumack sternly gazed at Wurs. "That's like if we went into Saint Aile and the Church made Emilia into a 'Hero' icon, caring more about her glory than whether she was alive or not. You think I don't know what the clan chiefs who tarred you as a loser did when you came back with Emilia in tow?"

"...That's a fine point to jab at me with, Hazel," Wurs shot back. "You see, Stumpy Scythe? This is how you use intelligence. Remember that."

"What...happened?" Suzuno wondered.

Albert bristled. "Bell, please, don't get into—"

"Oh, come on, Ranga, it's true. Listen, Stumpy Scythe," the Northern Clans leader began sharply. "This kid here's the only Mountain Corps captain who ever lost to an outside enemy. But it would have been the same no matter which warlord in our history was leading that army. Nobody could have defeated Adramelech. Nothing to be done about it. But what happened after that...wasn't great. This kid came back with Emilia, and he was gathering up the other clans he had been communicating with in secret...but then, there was this shameless leader who spat in his face, berating him for what happened in the past. All, you know, 'how dare you slither back here after losing so big,' and the like."

Even Suzuno could tell the "spat in his face" part was a metaphor. Judging from where Rumack was assigning the blame, this wasn't some impudent young man acting out of order, but the work of someone who let cowardice get the best of them, out of a need to separate the past from the present.

"But despite that," Suzuno reflected, "Albert beat Adramelech, he stamped out the Devil King's Army, and he is still working for people's futures—including people in the Northern Island. If you say you put pain upon him, Chief, would it be about time to repay him for that?"

"You want me to cover for being stingy with my pawns, eh? Hoo boy. Hard to mount a defense against that. I have a promise with Adramelech, too. What to

do, what to do...?”

“You have a promise with Adramelech? What kind?”

Seeing the chief herder hard-pressed to respond to Rumack’s ill-mannered accusations surprised Albert. Her bringing up a new name surprised him even further.

“Yes. He said, ‘When that young, brave general returns to this land, you must reward him for his efforts.’ That was just before he fought Emilia.”

“Wha...?”

This shocked Albert enough that he forgot to breathe for a moment. All words left his tongue.

“I’m sure he saw the writing on the wall once you invaded Phiyenci. He wasn’t there to fight a losing battle, of course, but Adramelech knew there was no such thing as absolutes in life.”

Albert had faced off against Adramelech three times—the first when the Devil King’s Army invaded, the second when Albert was ejected from the Northern Island, and the third when the demons were defeated for good. Losing the right to die as a Mountain Corps captain, and being denied the right to a final duel with him, must have filled him with shame somewhere in his mind, as if Adramelech never truly recognized him as a warrior. But no. The Great Demon General had recognized him as a true leader, through and through. And through his actions, he was admonishing Albert against an ill-advised death or duel, in order to show him he was a warrior with the hopes and dreams of his soldiers on his back.

“That...bastard... Why now?”

Wurs watched Albert as he struggled to deal with the swirling eddy of emotions in his heart, then pointed her pipe at Laila.

“Well, that’s the long and short of it, so I guess I’ll do what I can for you, eh? And in exchange for that, promise me you won’t mess this up, all right? Because if you save the world and trigger a huge war afterward, I won’t know why I bothered to listen to you!”

Laila spotted the glint in her eye. That advice was something everyone on Ente Isla should have taken to heart after Satan disappeared from the planet.

“Of course.”

“I hate people who say ‘of course’ and don’t actually do anything,” Wurs spat out, missing no opportunity to gripe at her audience. “Now, kid, you know we’re in the zirga season. If you’re going to take the Spear, best to do it in broad daylight, with all the clans watching you.”

“In broad daylight? What d’you mean?”

“Well, you’ve got Emilia, you’ve got Emeraldal, you’ve got Ranga... Got any other pawns we can use?”

This sounded incredibly bold. The zirga was the biggest event Phiyenci hosted, attended by clans from across the continent, and she wanted them to settle things right in the middle of it.

“Because I’m gonna push the pawn of your choice toward the next chief herder election. With my backing, nobody’s gonna protest you all joining the field. It’ll be up to you to find a way to take the Spear without anyone minding. Don’t use my influence to get the thing—participate in the zirga and make the clans want to have you haul it off. You got someone who can do that?”



Upon leaving the restaurant, their hands laden with souvenirs and their clothes reeking of smoke, the thoroughly puzzled group returned to Devil’s Castle.

“She wants us to pick someone to run for chief herder?” Albert scratched his head, pausing only to bite into the sandwich of ground goat meat, vegetables, and that singularly pungent sauce he took with him. “Who could we count on for that?”

“I can understand her logic,” Suzuno remarked. “Dhin Dhem Wurs is just ensuring we set the stage correctly, so we can more easily access the Spear. The problem is...”

“Yeah,” interjected Rumack, “she doesn’t want it to look like some outsider borrowing the chief’s influence, in the eyes of the other clans.”

“So not even Albert’s a possibility,” said Laila, arms crossed and looking a tad lost. “He’s too involved with Emilia and Emeralda. In fact, his name’s still in the Saint Aile records as a substitute for Emeralda. Could anyone even match the conditions we need at all?”

If they wanted to get as much support from Wurs as possible, their candidate couldn’t have even a whiff of political involvement with other countries. That was off the table, but within the group preparing to invade heaven, nobody could meet that condition while still being well versed enough in matters to hold the job.

“Being recommended for the position is a big deal, but the conditions are just too harsh...”

The chief herder, by the nature of the post, needed to be someone charismatic enough to enjoy islandwide popularity. It required different skills from the leader of the Mountain Corps, but battle prowess still wasn’t optional. Chief herders had later become corps leaders several times in the past. One didn’t need to be head and shoulders above the pack in every field, but they couldn’t blow it in every field, either.

Rumack pored over the notes that Wurs gave her about the training a chief would be graded on at the zirga. “Personality, popularity, a superior education, archery skills in a hunting setting, familiarity with magic and horsemanship, no Eastern or Western influence, and aware of the heaven-invasion plan... It’s silly. There’s no one.”

“What about Laila? Or maybe Gabriel? He ain’t connected to the West or the East, is he? And he could beat just about anyone in combat or magic.”

“I thought about that for a moment, Albert, but we had best avoid him,” Rumack said.

“Why is that?” he asked back.

“He’s simply not fit for the job. I doubt Lady Wurs would endorse him for us.”

“What d’you mean by that?”

“Well, no offense, but it didn’t seem like Lady Wurs trusted you a great amount. Besides, I fear his lips are too loose for his own good. I’d be on pins

and needles the whole time.”

She sounded reluctant to say it, but it was the unvarnished truth. Even Laila couldn’t contest it.

“Besides, Gabriel’s already been tasked with guarding Devil’s Castle.”

“Ah, yes, he was, wasn’t he? Given how low the enemy’s layin’, I totally forgot.”

No matter how rough they thought the chances were, the heavens could have picked this exact moment to storm the planet. The team had to put a sentry up around Devil’s Castle, at least, given its crucial role in capturing the heavens. But since Maou and Emi couldn’t be on call all the time, the job had to go to the second tier—Ashiya, Urushihara, or Gabriel. And since the first two were busy fixing the castle or carrying out other needed business, Gabriel needed to serve as the on-site security system, or else the safety of the whole operation was under question.

“We have to think about the human world, the enemies, and the demons, too. Maou and Lucifer look human, but their demonic force rules ’em right out.” Albert sighed. “There’s no way we can make that old bag happy. We’re screwed! Hey, Bell, you got any bright—”

“There is one person.”

“—ideas... Huh?”

“There is only one person.”

The other three gasped.

“Personality, popularity, education, magical sense, and excellent archery skills. Horsemanship, no—but she is well versed in our plans, she has worked hand in hand with us, and there are no Eastern or Western influences in her background. Plus, she knows the truth about Emilia, the Devil King, and how we are all related to each other. She is the only one.”

“Magic and archery?” Albert raised an eyebrow. “Since when did we have someone that useful?”

Laila, on the other hand, turned pale. “W-Wait! Wait! Bell, are you joking with

us?! You don't mean..."

"Who else could we call upon?"

"But—but if we—If we go with that, you know Emilia and Satan won't take it sitting down!"

"Why inform them?"

"Bell?!" Laila was shouting now.

"There is no need to."

"But...!"

"The chief will understand why, too, once we explain matters."

"This is crazy! It's just so incredibly hazardous!"

"Nothing hazardous about it. The zirga is not a battlefield; nothing the heavens would pay close attention to. Once Chief Wurs endorses her, we can keep her under your and Albert's guard, and all is well. If we talk to the Malebranche about it, perhaps they would even volunteer to bodyguard her. Farfarello and Libicocco, at least, would almost certainly seize upon the offer."

"That—that *would* be enough protection...but..."

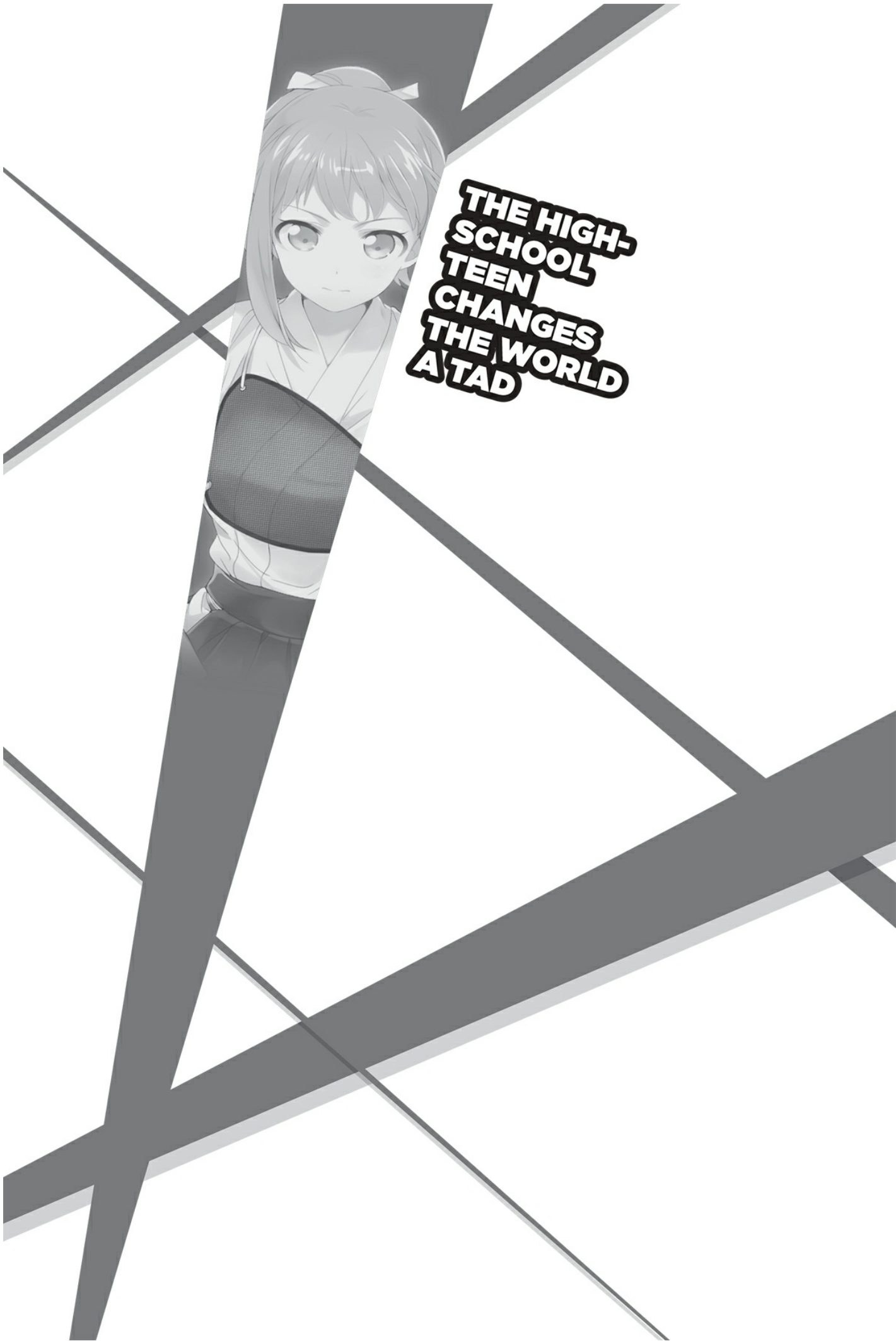
Laila started to stammer. Suzuno shook her head, her voice cold.

"We will need to check with her first, but—at this point in time—I think she will accept the offer."

"Wh-who are you talking about?"

Suzuno smiled a little at Albert.

"Someone you know quite well, Albert."



**THE HIGH-
SCHOOL
TEEN
CHANGES
THE WORLD
A TAD**

THE HIGH-SCHOOL TEEN CHANGES THE WORLD A TAD

“Emi-Yu, are you doing okay? You don’t look too good.”

“I don’t?”

“No. You getting enough sleep?”

Emi quelled the panic in her mind at having this casually lobbed at her by Akiko first thing in the morning shift.

“Oh, uh, I had too many drama series on my DVR, so I played them, and I couldn’t stop watching.”

“I’ve totally been there! Sometimes, I record a whole series and delete it before I ever watch it, but when I do start watching, I get the whole series queued up, and I wanna know what happens next, soooo...”

“R-right, yeah. So that kept me up late.”

“Yeah, I need to start paring down my list, too. My whole family uses my DVR, so we’re constantly running out of space!”

“Oh, yeah, that creeps up on you, huh? Ha-ha-ha...”

Emi *was* sleep-deprived, but she didn’t want Akiko to know the real reason why, so she dodged the subject long enough to point her attention elsewhere. What a relief.

“Ahh, but I’m gonna get busy with school and work before long. I don’t think I can just plop in front of the TV and start watching anytime soon.”

“Oh, like tests and reports and stuff?”

“Pretty much. College might look like it’s play, play, play all the time, but if you actually wanna study, it can keep you pretty busy!”

“Right,” Emi said, “but work’s gonna get busy, too, you know?”

“Well, I mean, there’s a lot of churn at the start of spring. People leave to go find full-time jobs for the April hiring rush. We got people to cover for that, you included, but you know, we’ll lose some high schoolers soon.”

“Oh. I guess Chiho may not be here for long, huh?”

Emi, still not terribly familiar with the Japanese high school curriculum, thought a bit about what kinds of assignments and tests someone Chiho’s age might have. But Akiko had other things on her mind.

“No! That’s right! Losing Chi’s gonna be huge!”

“Huh?!” Emi found herself almost shouting. “What do you mean?”

“Well, this is just my guess, so don’t tell anyone yet, but Chiho actually called me about four days ago.”

“Four days ago...?”

Emi looked at the calendar hanging on the other side of the counter. She didn’t have a shift that day.

“I thought *Hey, that was weird*, and when I picked up, it really *was* weird. She asked me if I could cover a few shifts for her.”

“What?”

This surprised Emi. At the Hatagaya location, if you couldn’t make a prescheduled shift for whatever reason, you were supposed to talk it over with Kisaki first. If she agreed to it, it was her job as manager to find someone to cover the shift for you. Crewmembers weren’t allowed to swap shifts among themselves.

“Yeah, pretty crazy, huh? I mean, just the idea of Chiho missing shifts blew my mind, so I asked her why, and her voice went all low, and she was like ‘it involves my future, and there’s this place I gotta go to help figure it out.’”

“Her future...?”

“Yeah. She’s gonna have college exams in the next school year, and that’s coming up soon, right? So I said yes, ’cause I figured it must’ve been something serious. I mean, Chi would never say something like that casually, right? And I got the okay for it from Kisaki later, but... I’m thinking, you know, maybe Chi

won't be around here much longer."

The thought seemed to perturb Akiko.

"Like, it took me a year before I got into college, so I'm not one to talk, but right now's about when teens really start prepping, you know? Some kids figure they're okay waiting until their final year of high school begins, but if you consider the standardized public-school tests that took place back in January, there's really less than one year until college exams for girls like Chiho."

"So maybe she'll start going to a test-prep center or something?"

"I didn't get that nosy about it, but that sounds right to me. Kisaki looked like she knew something."

She probably would, given how she had likely seen off dozens, if not hundreds, of teenage part-timers like that over the years. She could see the signs, the general trends, that dictated how much staff she had to work with, and she knew that February, just before the new fiscal year began in Japan, was a pretty frenetic time. It was common all across the country for high school workers to come back from spring break, then quit soon after to devote time to test prep.

"Wow... Chiho, though, huh?"

It was weird. Emi understood that Chiho was in the late stages of high school, but it was still hard to imagine her sitting in a classroom, getting test-prep advice from a tutor somewhere. The Hero didn't know any other high school students, but based on what she had seen, she knew Chiho was way ahead of her contemporaries in talent. Maybe she figured she wouldn't take such a... normal route in her life.

But that was the thing. Chiho was just a normal, Japan-born, Japan-raised girl. Since becoming involved with Ente Isla, she had navigated her way through innumerable crises, developing her mental and emotional fortitude. That was how Emi and Suzuno thought of her, and they would know, having both gone through far more than she had. And something in Emi told her that something as normal as college exams, at this point, wouldn't be formidable enough to alter Chiho's regular schedule. She had thought, selfishly enough, that Chiho would always be there for her.

“That *was* selfish, I know.”

Quitting MgRonald to prepare for college didn’t mean Chiho would be cut off from Emi and the rest of the staff. But it did mean a little more distance—and now the demons, Emi, and Suzuno had let the battle against Ente Isla’s heaven pull them further away from Sasazuka. Emi couldn’t guess what things would be like by July, Maou’s ordained deadline for the whole thing, but July meant summer break for Chiho’s last high school year. A time when she’d have to focus the most on her exams. Even if everyone was back in Room 201 by then, they wouldn’t be eating together as frequently as they used to.

“Thank you for calling MgRonald at Hatagaya Station. This is Yusa speaking. Did you want to make a delivery order?”

Nodding at Akiko, Emi turned toward the delivery computer as she answered the call on her headset.

“...All right, and barbecue sauce. Will that complete your order today? ... Thank you. Let me repeat your order, just to be sure...”

Chiho was drifting away from Emi’s regular life. It seemed bizarre to consider. But thinking about Emi, sitting here in front of Hatagaya Station, wearing a MgRonald uniform and taking phone orders, it showed that “regular life” had a way of changing all too easily on a person. Emi, for one, changed jobs due to personal reasons (albeit rather unique ones), and since then, she hadn’t been able to see her old work friends, Rika Suzuki and Maki Shimizu, as much. Little changes in life could make people seem that little bit more distant.

“Okay, we should have your order there in approximately twenty minutes... All right, thank you very much! Bye-bye! ...Phew. Delivery up. You’re heading for southern Sasazuka, Maou.”

Even with those gloomy thoughts in her mind, Emi kept up the pace, switching her headset to in-store mode and sending orders to Maou, who was on standby upstairs.

“Roger that. I’ll head out. Aki, you take the upstairs counter for a bit.”

Akiko went up the stairs to replace him. She wasn’t a certified barista, but *MgRonald Barista* was more an honorary title than anything. An experienced

staffer like Akiko or Kawata could man the MgCafé space just fine, as long as they knew how.

Heading down the stairs, Maou looked at the address on the receipt and studied the delivery map hanging next to the scooter keys for a few moments.

“Oh, okay, over here. There’s a lot of twisty back alleys down there, so it’s kinda hard to figure out. The apartment buildings all look the same, and stuff.”

Emi absentmindedly watched Maou as he squinted at the map, working out the route to take. She wondered if he knew Akiko was swapping shifts with Chiho, but she resisted asking him—not when he was about to leave. Instead, she silently prepared the pieces of the delivery order she could handle behind the counter.

What would he think if he grew more distant from Chiho? In Emi’s mind, they were closer than ever now that Chiho was going to Ente Isla. If she quit her job to study for exams, it wasn’t like there’d suddenly be this chasm between them.

Emi herself had no plans for her life after the Ignora battle. If she wanted to, she could continue with life in Japan, following in Chiho’s footsteps and preparing for a higher education of her own. But Maou couldn’t. As Devil King, once he was done in heaven, he’d be responsible for commanding his demons. And if he got accepted for a full-time position at MgRonald and decided to try juggling a job in Japan with a job in the demon realm, there’s no way he’d continue the lazy, poor, yet generally contented life he’d led in Villa Rosa Sasazuka up to now.

If it came to that, the question became how he’d want things to be with Chiho...

“...Well.”

Emi shook her head, brushing away the bizarre thoughts taking over her mind. Maybe things were temporarily calmer between humans and demons, but there was still no real détente between the entire human race and the entire demon realm. Maou still hadn’t taken any responsibility for invading Ente Isla in the first place. But whatever happened with him and Chiho in the future, why was it so easy for her to imagine a future where Maou remained Devil King?

“...I wish he’d get hired on full-time, or do something that’d compel him to stay here for good.”

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

Maou must have heard part of her muttering, because he lifted his eyes from the map and turned her way.

“No, nothing. The order’s all set to go.”

Making sure the burgers and fries were done, Emi placed the cold drinks into the delivery bag and handed it to Maou.

“Thanks.”

He took out his outdoor windbreaker and helmet.

“Oh, and Emi?”

“Yes?”

“You look kinda pale today. Are you sleeping all right?”

“It’s nothing! Get going!”

“Uh, sure. The place is yours.”

The tone of her voice all but pushed Maou out of the store.

Listening to the sound of the engine fade away, Emi let out a little sigh. Maou was just as right as Akiko about the lack of sleep. But she could never reveal to anyone that Maou himself was the cause.

Ever since that night when Suzuno gave her that strange news, Emi had been pressured by Alas Ramus into thinking about what kind of chocolate to give to Maou almost every evening. But perhaps that was shifting the blame. It was Emi, after all, who had planted the thought in Alas Ramus’s mind in the first place.

“...My brain’s coughing up errors again, maybe.”

Why did he have to ask Alas Ramus *that*?

As explained by Chiho’s friend, if Chiho could give her chocolate alongside Alas Ramus’s own homemade creation, that would take any awkward burden

off Maou's mind. As Emi immediately saw it, this meant she'd have to get involved with the child's baking. That, in itself, was fine. It was her job to help this tiny child with this messy job, so anything Alas Ramus gave Maou would inherently be a collaboration with Emi. It was a perfectly natural thing for a mother and child to do, and even if Maou accepted it knowing full well Emi was involved, she doubted he would think anything special about it.

But if she did that, *she would have to think*: What kind of chocolate would make Maou happy? And also: Why did she consider the question at all? Was it simply because she thought Alas Ramus should make something Maou would enjoy? Or was it because she wanted the results to be on par with Chiho's no-doubt masterpiece, to make the camouflage complete?

Or...

"Ugh... This is so stupid. Stupid."

Or is because she wanted to do something for Maou's sake?

"This isn't funny."

Her brain was just one big error message. What would thinking any of this accomplish for her?

"What does it matter? If I say Alas Ramus made it, he'll love it. That's good enough."

Saying it out loud—as if that made it more convincing, somehow—Emi switched mental gears and went back to work. A little box on the side of the cash register's touch panel showed the date as February 13, but she paid it no mind. She didn't care at all that the following day was Valentine's Day. Or so she thought.

"Hello! ...Oh?"

She thought this new customer would be the perfect way to distract herself. It turned out to be someone she knew well.

"Hey! How's it hangin'?"

"Hello, Rika. You eating here today?"

"Well, I guess so, in the end."

Rika Suzuki—Emi’s best friend, and one of the few people on Earth who knew everything about Ente Isla—looked a tad ill at ease. Her caramel-colored long coat and white pants were normal enough, but she also brought in a small, wheeled suitcase, as if embarking on a weekend trip. Emi gave her a look.

“Hey, I don’t see Maou, but he’s here today, right?”

Emi gave her another look. “Huh? Um, he’s out on a delivery right now...but did you need him?”

“Yeah. Well, him and you both. You and Maou work ’til six, right?”

Rika checked her watch. It was four in the afternoon—a bit early for dinner—but why was she aware of Maou’s and Emi’s work schedules in the first place?

“Once you’re both off, there’s some place I want to take you guys to.”

“Me and Maou?”

“Yeah. Oh, um, and I’ll just chill out and have dinner in the meantime, so no need to hurry on my account. Uh, I’ll have a fried-pork burger combo with fries and hot tea, please. I got a coupon for it.”

“Uh, uhhh, oh, thank you. One moment...”

Leaving Emi in the dust, Rika barked out her order, then gave way for the customer behind her. By the time Emi was done handling the line, Rika was already seated at a faraway table.

Maou came back to the restaurant about fifteen minutes after Rika showed up, delivery bag and helmet under his arms. He spotted her right off.

“Rika’s here?”

“Yeah, she came just now. It sounds like she wanted to see us both.”

“Me, too? Really?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

Maou seemed exactly as clueless as her about what it could be.

“Ah, well. We got a bit over an hour until we’re off. Anything else happen?”

“Not in here, no. Nobody went up to the café while you were gone.”

“Ah.”

Maou nodded as he put the keys, helmet, and windbreaker back in place, washing his hands thoroughly before running back upstairs.

“Rika?”

Then, Emi noticed Rika following Maou the whole way with her eyes. When he was gone, she hung her head low, as if exhausted. She had come to visit many times before, but this Rika was like none she had ever known.

Akiko breathed a sigh of relief as she came back down. “Whew! I was worried there’d be some complicated coffee order before Maou came back.” Then, she ran into the restaurant space, looking for work to do.

“...Something’s going on.”

Before Emi’s eyes, Rika was engaged in some truly bizarre behavior. Chiho, meanwhile, hadn’t been acting like herself, either. She pondered this, growing increasingly uncomfortable.

“Ah...nnh.”

She stifled a yawn shortly before it escaped her mouth. Right then, another customer had come in, headed her way, and there was no way could she greet a customer with a full, cheek-stretching yawn. Of course, the cause of that nervous yawn, when you got down to it, was the fact that she had to deliver chocolate to Maou sooner or later. Was she really acting any less strange than Rika or Chiho? Maybe she was the weirdest of all.

“Hello! Feel free to order at the counter when you’re ready.”

It took a mental reset to drum up the energy to deliver that peppy greeting.

“Sorry to bother you guys out of nowhere.”

“No, it’s fine, but where are we going?”

Emi and Maou were following Rika as the three of them took his usual commuter route.

“Um, it’s right nearby. You mind walking a little bit?”

“Sure, but...”

“Uh, wherever we’re going, I’d like to stop by my apartment first...”

Rika turned her head toward Maou, who was already busy griping as he walked his bike along, and nodded. “Sure thing. It’s right by your place anyway.”

“It is? *What* is?”

“You’ll see, you’ll see. Hey, Emi, is Alas Ramus with you?”

“Huh? Yes...”

Neither Suzuno nor Urushihara were available today, and since she only worked until six anyway, she decided to just give Alas Ramus a bit more time in “fusion” mode than usual.

“Good. Because I’m sorry, um, the person we’re meeting with said not to tell you anything until we all arrived, so...”

““Huh?””

This was making less and less sense to Maou and Emi. If they were headed near Villa Rosa Sasazuka, neither of them could think of any place Rika would know about. Maybe Shiba’s home next to the apartment building? If so, then why all this secrecy? And what was in that suitcase of hers, making a huge racket as she rolled it down the asphalt? She looked like she was about to board a train for a quick overnighter—there was no reason at all for her to stay at Maou’s deserted apartment building.

So the procession continued, Rika leading the way for the thoroughly perplexed pair, until they reached Villa Rosa Sasazuka.

“Okay,” Maou said as he parked his bike, “so seriously, where are we going?”

“It’s no place bad, I promise. Oh, and we’ll get dinner over there, too, so don’t worry about that.”

“Dinner?” Emi reflexively asked. “Is it a restaurant or something?” Rika was sounding extremely weird to her. If they were going someplace that offered dinner, she would have mentioned that first thing, not right now.

“Not...exactly, no. But I guess they got a lot of stuff you wouldn’t normally get to eat, so...”

Rika put her hands together.

“But save the questions for later and just get ready for me, okay? If you don’t like it, you can leave anytime. I can make up for it.”

“...All right. Whatever!”

Maou looked as confused as ever; however, he was getting a bit sick of all the local restaurants he knew. If he could try some uncommon cuisine tonight, that was as good an excuse to go out as any. Plus, it was Rika inviting them, and he knew Rika wouldn’t hang out anywhere *too* weird. It wasn’t exactly normal, no, but so be it.

So Maou asked the other two to wait a moment as he climbed the stairs—but the moment Maou disappeared down the upstairs hall, Rika lifted her suitcase and ran up herself.

“Whoa, Rika?”

Emi, in a panic, followed her. But Rika was so far ahead, she even had the time to see if she was being pursued. And before Emi could make it up, Rika was in the hallway and plunging right into Room 201.

“Whoa! Wh-what’re you doing? I told you to wait!”

Maou, about to take a puffy winter jacket off a hanger in his room (a little extra layer for the cold night), gave Rika a shocked look. Emi, following close behind, was astounded to find Rika standing on his tatami-mat floor, not even bothering to take her shoes off.

“Okay, sorry, just one sec...”

Rika walked around the side of the futon freshly laid out on the floor.

“What’re you doing?!”

“Hang on, this’ll take just one moment.”

“What are you...?”

“Aghh?!”

Maou froze, hearing the hysterical scream from Emi out in the hallway. But before he could ask what happened, Acieth was upon her, picking her up in her

arms.

“Oooh, good timing, Acieth!”

“Whoo-hoo!”

Rika gave her a thumbs-up. Acieth replied with a wink.

“Acieth, what are you *doing*?! You too, Rika! What’s going on?!”

“Hey! What the hell, guys? What are you up to?!”

“Okay, I don’t wanna bother flipping this over, so sorry, guys...”

Ignoring Emi’s and Maou’s shouts, Rika took something unbelievable out from her jacket.

“Here we are!”

With a little grunt of effort, she plunged it into a space between the tatami mats.

“Rika?!”

Emi’s surprise was understandable. Rika had an angel’s feather pen, allowing anyone to create a Gate to another world.

A well of light bubbled up from where the pen stood as they watched. The mat in the very center of the cramped room burst into radiant light, as bright as the sun, enveloping a bit of the comforter on one side of the futon.

“Whoa, I did that?! Wow! I’m some kind of sorceress. This is so exciting! Oh, right, your shoes, Maou...”

As if forgetting about them until now, she picked Maou’s shoes up from the front door...and, with them and her suitcase, plunged into the Gate.

“Ah! Hey?!”

Maou and Emi stood motionless for a moment, dumbfounded at Rika’s brazen behavior.

“Wh...what’re we gonna do?!”

“What are...? I dunno! Acieth, put me down a sec! We gotta go after Rika...!”

“Don’t worry, Emi! We will certainly chase her, no questions!”

“Huh? What? W-Wait, Acieth, are... Ahhhh?!”

Incapable of putting up any resistance, Emi found herself dragged into the Gate by Acieth. Maou froze again, this time for a few seconds, as he took this in.

“Wh-what—what the hell? Uh, uh, the door, I gotta lock the door... Hey, hang on!”

Snapping out of it, he latched the front door, then darted around the room for a little bit, making sure he had his wallet and phone even though he knew the Gate was connected to Ente Isla. Then, with a nervous nod, he jumped in.

“Guys, wait up!”

He swam across the dimensional trail, trying to catch the three small figures far ahead of him.

“Goddammit! Why can’t I use one of those?!”

The Gate that Rika opened up with her feather pen tried to allow Maou in, but as a demon, he was forced to overlap the path with his own magic in order to navigate. It was vastly different from the Gate he personally used to travel between planets. There was no way Rika, who boasted zero holy force, could build a Gate this stable by herself.

“...Hmm?”

But then, an odd thought crossed his mind. A question that struck at the core, one that seemed even stranger than Rika’s odd activity. A feather pen like that was made from an archangel’s wing, making it impossible for demons to use. Laila taught a young Maou that herself, and when other demons tried sticking the pen into the ground, nothing ever happened.

Rika had now proven that any Earthling could use the thing, as long as they weren’t demonic. If the sorcerers on Ente Isla—messing around with the Stairs to Heaven and other fiddly Gate spells, as they had to have been doing—heard about this, they’d probably be livid.

But they would need to wait, because another question just entered Maou’s mind. If it was this easy to open a Gate connecting planets to planets...

“...Why didn’t the people back on those guys’ home world open any Gates?”



“Oof...nnnnngh.”

“And down!”

“Ahh!”

“Ow!”

After an interdimensional journey of some forty minutes, Rika, Acieth, Emi, and Maou landed in order...

“...Where are we?”

...in a spot that definitely wasn't Devil's Castle on the Central Continent.

“What the hell?”

Neither Emi nor Maou recognized the spot at all. But they could tell what kind of place it was.

“A church... Wait, a full Church cathedral?!”

“What?!”

Maou opened his eyes wide at Emi's exclamation. Then, he stared at Rika, the woman who brought them here. The decor did resemble the Church cathedrals he had seen in the cities of the Central Continent, back when he was sacking them.

“A-Acieth! Rika Suzuki! What the hell are you...?”

But before Rika could answer, another voice came up from below.

“Oh, you're here?”

“...Um, who's that with you?”

It was Albert, along with a large, muscular man whom Maou and Emi didn't recognize and who was a measure larger than Albert himself. His eyes looked weirdly sinister, but his hair was waxed up and combed into a straight split down the middle.

“We did it!”

“Sorry we're late!”

With Maou and Emi too flummoxed by this cavalcade of events to respond, Acieth and Rika gave the pair a hearty hello.

“Hey,” Albert replied. “I’m glad it worked. Bell ’n’ I spent hours debating over whether you’d pull it off.”

“Oh, I was so nervous! I didn’t know whether this feather pen would work for me or not, so my heart was racing the whole time!”

“No, you did a real good job, lady. You even nailed the landing out of the Gate.”

“Ohh, man, I need a rest...”

“Ahh, Rika! I love you! Big drive to do this! Me, I cannot believe it is first time for you!”

“Wha, who, why, what, wait...”

“What?! Who?! Why?! What?! Wait!!”

Both Maou and Emi had generally the same reaction.

The unknown man stepped up to them, solemnly taking a knee.

“I must apologize, Your Demonic Highness.”

““Huh?””

The man, who resembled a football or rugby player, was now bowing his head toward Maou. He was a demon.

“Y-you...”

“This is the form I have taken, but you are speaking to Libicocco.”

“L-Libicocco?!”

Maou was floored at being greeted by a Malebranche chieftain in a cathedral. But looking back, Farfarello had taken a human form on Earth as well. Libicocco was enormous by Malebranche standards; maybe this was the shape he’d naturally take as a regular guy.

“My liege, the Great Demon General of the East and Lady Bell have granted me the honorable role of accompanying you.”

“Ashiya and Suzuno?!”

“Alciel and Bell?!”

Albert, Libicocco, Rika, and Acieth certainly made for a ragtag bunch, but if it was Ashiya and Suzuno planning all this, it made even less sense than before. Albert, perhaps realizing this, grinned at them.

“You two are lookin’ great, guys! First off, I guess I oughta tell you, you’re in the Northern Island. This is the Church cathedral in the Goat Pasture, better known as Phiyenci.”

“The—the Northern Island?!”

“Phiyenci... That’s the united capital, isn’t it?! Why would Rika Suzuki take us someplace like this?!”

“Ah, well, we figured you’d be livid if me or Eme or Bell took ya. I wanted someone who’d never spill the beans to you if asked, and Bell said this lady Rika ought to fill the bill. So she introduced her to me.”

“Well, I’m just glad I had Acieth to help me out! Man, I thought I was gonna have a heart attack those whole forty minutes. Not as bad as when I first heard about all this stuff, but still. Man, it’s cold!”

Rika opened up her wheeled suitcase. It contained a toiletry bag and a few outfits geared for cold weather, the perfect overnight-stay package.

“Stop lying there in the heap forever, Maou and Emi! We have the free time for now, but the food stalls, they not open forever! And Laila, she save the good seats for us, so let’s be quick!”

“W-Wait! Wait a second! Laila did what?! Please, guys, stop having fun confusing me like this! What’s going on? What is all this? What are you bastards scheming?!”

With nobody coming forward with a coherent explanation, things grew more confusing by the minute for Maou and Emi. But what Rika had for them next made everything else seem trivial.

“So they’re having this archery exhibition today, right? It’s, like, the biggest event in the whole zirga, and Chiho’s entered into it, so we’re all gonna go

cheer her on!”

“Uh.....”

“Wha.....”

This was exactly what being at a loss for words meant.

Chiho was entered in the archery exhibition? One of the events in the zirga, a large conference convened to pick the next chief herder? Maou had no clue why any of this was happening.

“But hey,” Albert told the stunned pair, “seeing is believing, right? She’s been shootin’ up a storm.”

“Oh! Hey, over here, you two!”

Lost in a vast crowd, Maou and Emi heard a voice calling them.

They were in the central square of Phiyenci, and right in the middle of it, the Spear of Adramelechinus loomed higher than any watchtower, basking in the afternoon sun and casting a vast shadow over the peaceful world it lorded over. Truly, a weapon worthy of Adramelech himself, head of the Bluehorn clan. A sort of ad hoc arena had been built nearby, allowing you to look straight up at the Spear, and inside it was a gaudily decorated wooden stage, where the archery exhibition took place.

The grandstand, built parallel along the paths the arrows took from the stage to their targets, were packed almost to the brim—but one section was built like box seats, allowing you to sit any way you wanted inside them. Laila was waving at them from one such box, so Emi pressed on through the crowd, Maou following behind.

The archery exhibition had already started. Many young people filled the stage, showing off their shooting skills with the hunting bows unique to the Northern Island. Bets were apparently being taken in one corner of the stands, judging by the large board full of names and inscrutable numbers that changed with every arrow unfurled, and how the crowd was filled with calls of joy or despair in turns. Considering this event would help decide the next head of state, it felt more like a raucous town festival.

Emi and Maou picked their way through the stands, rubbing their shoulders against the crowd. “I’m glad you made it in time,” Laila said with a smile as they approached the box. “Chiho’s group should be up in about half an hour, so *ngh...?!*”

Emi marched straight into the box, shoes and all, and immediately grabbed Laila by the collar.

“Could you tell me what’s going on?”

“Um, ah, the *mmph?*”

Maou, arriving a beat later, then grabbed Laila by the head.

“You’ve gone over the line one time too many.”

“Ah, w-wait, guys! You’re scaring me! People are watching! They’re gonna see us!”

“I don’t care.”

“So what?”

“W-Wait! Wait, I know this sounds like an excuse, but I was against it at first, too, I said it was just too crazy to work, I did, I stopped them, I said we can’t get Chiho involved in this, but Bell suggested it, and when she brought it up with Chiho, she was all for it, raring to go, and she said we needed to keep it secret from you both until today, so I couldn’t say anything, and honestly, I didn’t think Chiho would remain such a zirga contender all the way to today, so if we got this far, you know, she said if she made it to the end of the exhibition, she wanted you to see it, so I really didn’t do anything this time, in fact, I tried to put a stop to it, believe me, please, *ow, ow, ow*, you’re hurting me, everyone else agreed to it, but I was against it until the end, I heard you were angry when she did the same thing at Tokyo Tower before, so I was the only one to say no until the very end, and it was Chiho herself who convinced Alciel to do it, so please, let me go, I can’t breathe, I can’t *breeeeathe!*”

Being lifted into the air by Emi, Laila thought it prudent to use what could potentially be her last breath to fully outline her defense. Her head grew visibly paler with every syllable, so the two of them finally felt it prudent to let her down. They were still less than convinced.

“What do you mean, Bell suggested it?”

Not even Maou had heard Emi’s voice go this murderously low very often. It made Laila go even paler before she could catch her breath.

“Haaah, haaah, that—that, you know... Huff... If we just asked them to hand over the Spear, haaah, the Northern Island wouldn’t go for that, mmph...”

It was Emi and her band, after all, who left the Spear here. They didn’t leave any instructions on what to do with it, and given that this was the only relic of the Devil Overlord everyone knew the exact location of, Emi knew the wrong approach could lead to headaches later on. That was why, once Emi and Maou had learned about the relics, they had informed everyone that they’d be ready to do anything asked of them in order to retrieve it. Emi, in particular, intended to make a personal plea to the chief herder to borrow the Spear, if all other options were exhausted. She had decided as much long before they had any concrete plan for the relic, because she knew their group likely wouldn’t stumble upon any other bright ideas.

Thus, she had been thinking this whole time about how to proceed on this topic with Chief Herder Dhin Dhem Wurs and the other clan chieftains, without letting word about the true nature of their expedition to heaven get out, and without causing any political strife afterward. So how did this wind up with Chiho down there on the zirga stage?

“The Devil King and I didn’t want to expose Chiho to any more danger. What do all you people think you’re even doing...?”

“Of all the mean things to say about Chiho! You can see how aware she is of what’s going on. Why not let her do what she wants a little?”

“Huh?”

“Wh-who’re you?”

Just when Emi was gritting her teeth hard enough to require dental work, a voice interrupted her. It belonged to an old woman who had appeared in a nearby box seat at some point, intently watching the exhibition.

“Hmm, what a surprise...”

The woman, monocle covering one eye, looked up at Maou.

“So you’re Satan, the Devil King?”

““!””

Maou and Emi gasped.

“This’ll be our first direct encounter, won’t it? I was surprised enough about Stumpy Scythe, but you’re pretty young, too, eh? You don’t cut too impressive a figure for someone goin’ around callin’ himself a king. You getting three square meals a day?”

The compact old woman’s weirdly overwhelming presence was too much for Maou to bear at first. But Emi, having met her once, couldn’t hide the shock of seeing someone she never expected here.

“...Are you Chief Dhin Dhem Wurs?”

“Been a while, hasn’t it? And hopefully, you won’t mind if I don’t call you by name. Never know who might be listening in on us!”

Dhin Dhem Wurs, chief herder and leader of the Northern Island, kept her back turned to the Hero Emilia. She didn’t hesitate to bandy the “Satan” name around, oddly enough, but their seats were a fair distance away, and her voice was all but drowned in the clamor and excitement as the next archery contestant approached. Any attention generated by Emi assaulting Laila was now squarely focused on the festival.

Taking another look around, Emi found Albert, Libicocco, Acieth, and Rika seated in the box to the left. The one on their right was empty.

“Dhin Dhem Wurs? Hey, isn’t that the chief herder’s name?!”

Maou, taking a moment to come to that conclusion, was sent reeling by it. The woman herself gave him a peeved sneer.

“Well, look at that high-pitched voice you got! Why don’t you quit your whining and sit down? This is the archery exhibition, the biggest event of the zirga! We have wannabe stars from every clan in the land, and people islandwide betting on them. I pulled a few strings to get the best seats in the house for you; the least you could do is watch!”

Emi confronted the woman just a tad more politely than how she usually treated Laila: “Chief Wurs, what is going on here?!”

“What’s going on? It’s you all who want the Spear, is it not? And the North can’t exactly give it away for free, can we? But now we’re on the cusp of a war that could determine the fate of the human race, right? So I’ve arranged things so you can get your hands on it about as quick as you’re ever gonna.”

“A-Arranged things...?”

“I have a vague idea of what you’ve been up to over the past two years. You and the Devil King were goofing around on another planet, and now you’re going to try fighting a god so you can reunite that daughter you two made and her friends?”

That was a little less than “vague,” and “making” a daughter sounded kind of suspect, but it was clear Wurs was aware of Maou’s and Emi’s lives in Japan.

“So you know, normally, I’d take anyone asking for the Spear and throw them out on their ear, but this was my childhood friend asking, so I said ‘all right, I guess I’ll pitch in a little.’ I’m sure you guys don’t appreciate being left out of the loop, but not even the Hero can play the, um, hero all the time. So deal with it!”

Wurs took a moment to survey the entire arena, from one end to the other.

“Zirgas like this attract a scary number of candidates, and the funniest thing is, they’re all volunteering to actually do something as annoying as be chief herder. We even get rubberneckers from other continents. That’s why we’ve kept security tighter than usual, and my youngest granddaughter’s one of the entrants in the archery exhibition, so this whole joint is on lockdown. So if you don’t wanna be ashamed of your fancy title, lady, then sit down and cheer on my granddaughter, won’t you?”

“Whoa, ma’am, please don’t act like our talk is over,” Maou interjected. “You haven’t told us anything we asked about. Who the hell proceeded with this whole thing without telling either of us?”

“Yes! I refuse to accept this if you don’t tell me anything!”

“Mmm?”

Wurs gave another annoyed look to the bitterly protesting pair.

“Laila, why are your daughter and son-in-law a couple of sticks in the mud, huh? Or did they get more of a conservative upbringing because you’re such a piece of work?”

“I’m not her son-in-law!”

“He’s not her son-in-law! And Laila, what’s going on here? You *know* Chief Dhin Dhem Wurs?!”

“Um, she’s a friend from the past.”

“Some friend you are, you ditz. Y’see, I’m like this with her. Just like you two are.”

As she spoke, one of the stones on her monocle began to glow.

“Oh?”

As it did, the mark on Acieth’s forehead emitted the same glow, several seats away, and then:

“Pheww! Mommy, where are we?”

“A-Alas Ramus?!”

The other Yesod fragment separated herself from Emi.

Discovering another fragment bearer gave her and Maou the umpteen-millionth surprise of the day. Laila mentioned she had passed out several fragments around the world, but how did one of them wind up in Dhin Dhem Wurs’s hands? It was left to Emi and Maou to fantasize over what could have happened between them sixty years ago.

“Ooh, and here’s the fabled daughter of the Hero and the Devil King, eh? Laila, you better not get involved with raising her, y’hear? Anyone influenced by you is bound to be rotten to the core when they grow up!”

“Lidem! You’re seriously starting to make me angry!”

Despite the unfamiliar surroundings, Alas Ramus didn’t seem too disturbed. Instead, she looked up at Wurs from her perch on Emi’s knee.

“Who’s dat lady?”

“Mmm? Well, little girl, I used to be friends with your granny.”

“Um, Lidem? I’m not really her grandmother...”

“Huhh?! Wait, are you the type of gal who resents being called ‘granny’ in public? See here, you can look and act as young as you want, but to your grandkids, you’re always gonna be good ol’ Granny! So if you don’t want her to get bullied in school, then just let her call you that! What was your name? Alas Ramus? Come here, girl. You should watch this with old Dhin Dhem. It’s fun!”

“H-hey!”

Alas Ramus obediently crawled over to Wurs’s lap, leaving Maou and Emi to blankly stare at her. Ignoring the pair, the chief pointed at one of the figures on the stage.

“See? Here she comes! Give her a big cheer! That’s my precious granddaughter down there!”

“Oh, come on.”

At that moment, the once chaotic crowd fell into a glassy silence. CHIHO SASAKI WURS, read the name on the board. On stage, with all the competitors dressed in their best archery gear, she had chosen a bright-white martial-arts uniform, a black chest guard, and a black pair of *hakama* pants, her hair tied back to avoid getting in her face. It was the classic uniform for *kyudo*, archery as practiced in Japan, and now she was in the *toriyumi* pose, standing boldly and quietly as she sized up her target.

From her left side, she held her *namiyumi*, a medium-sized bow by *kyudo* standards but still over seven feet tall. The *uchihazuru*, the upper tip of the bow, dipped down to a spot just a few inches above the floor in front of her, and in her right hand were a *haya* and an *otoya*, the two types of arrows used in the sport. It was the classical *toriyumi* stance, and once it was taken, Chiho took a deep breath and gave the audience a steep, polite forward bow, the top *uchihazuru* edge not moving an inch in height.



Upon rising again, she took a large step forward with her left foot, then a smaller one with her right, both pairs of toes lining up.

“What a lovely stance!”

The chief herder’s words summed up the feelings of everyone in the arena. Even to someone like Maou, who knew nothing about *kyudo*, the sight turned the churning waters in his mind into a perfectly still pond. That was the power of Chiho’s presence.



Four days beforehand, Suzuno’s suggestion to have Chiho participate in the zirga received a chilly reception from nearly everyone involved—Laila, of course, but also Albert and Rumack, as well as Ashiya and Urushihara. The last two, in particular, emphasized that not only was the plan crazy, there was no way in hell Maou and Emi would sign off on it. Suzuno, for her part, agreed—but no one could think of anyone else who could join the zirga festivities, or any other way to bring the Spear off the island without a big ruckus.

“Of course,” reasoned Suzuno, “I do not suggest we force Chiho into this. We need to explain to her why she is being nominated, how it has come to this, and what we expect to happen, and if she says she cannot do it, we will think of another way. But I believe that Chiho best matches the type of person Chief Wurs has described to us.”

“But you seriously think we should say nothing to my liege and Emilia?” Ashiya asked. “The mere thought of their anger after all is revealed frightens me beyond imagination.”

Anyone who knew the pair’s relationship with Chiho could picture the same thing.

“I imagine so, yes. The Devil King and Emilia will be dead set against it. The former, in particular, was less than enthusiastic about Chiho visiting Ente Isla in the first place.”

“Precisely. Thus...”

“So let us keep it a secret from them.”

“How did we reach that conclusion?!”

Suzuno gauged the protesting Ashiya with a pair of cold eyes. “Telling them will not improve matters for us.”

“Perhaps not, but...”

“Alciel, you have not forgotten why the Devil King and Emilia are spending an outsized amount of their time in Sasazuka right now, have you?”

She eyed the people around her.

“Let us be honest. In these preparatory stages, neither of them are capable of contributing very much. We will need their strength for the battle looming before us, but for the moment, there is nothing we can assign to them, even if we wished to keep them busy. So what will telling them accomplish, when we already know they will be against it? I am not asking Chiho to join us on the battlefield, amid intense combat. I would merely ask her to join in an Ente Islan festival. What need is there to be nervous? What basis does anyone have to be against Chiho taking this vital role?”

“Th-that...”

“After all the danger we have already exposed her to; after all the aid she has provided to our daily lives—after basking in all that, you wish to expel her from the group?”

“No way, dude,” Urushihara said. “Look, whether it’s Chiho Sasaki out there or not, assuming we can put on a good show or whatever at the zirga, how’s that gonna convince everyone to let us take the Spear? The chief doesn’t have the power to order anyone to fork it over. Whether one of our allies becomes chief or not, it doesn’t change things too much.”

He had a point. Wurs’s indirect support was what made this plan possible, but exactly what this support involved was unclear. Zero details were nailed down.

“That,” countered Suzuno, “we can tackle in the future, with the way we move things forward. Regardless of our approach, however, I guarantee to you all that Chiho is our best choice.”

“Huhh?”

“...We cannot deliberate any further unless we know whether Chiho will accept. If she does, I would like to discuss the details at that point.”

“Wh-whoa...”

“There is nothing to worry about. If she refuses, you may feel free to report my behavior to the Devil King or Emilia. That, and regardless of her response, feel free to debate over any other possible solutions we may think of. Now... Laila?”

“Huh? Um, yes?”

Laila, the first person to pick up on (and vehemently oppose) Suzuno’s intentions, sat up in her seat.

“Come with me. If Chiho agrees, then whether we can actually take the Spear or not will be up to you.”

Laila blinked at her, confused.

“...What?”

“Suzuno? Laila? Why are you here all of a sudden?”

It was a rare combination to see at the front door of her house. Chiho let them in and offered some tea and crackers in her room—Laila acting oddly antsy, Suzuno looking like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.

“Yes, well, there have been some movements on the other side. We wanted to tell you about them, and we also had a favor to ask. Thus, the two of us came here, since our schedules were relatively free.”

“Oh, I see! Ashiya texted me that you guys found a few of the Devil Overlord relics. That’s good news, huh?”

It would be easy to imagine that the Devil Overlord Satan, were he alive today, might be flummoxed to hear that news of his relics was being texted to a human teenager’s phone, as if those relics were a dropped wallet recovered at the local lost-and-found.

“Ah, yes, the Nothing and the Sorcery of the False Gold. They are in the custody of Camio in the demon realm at the moment, but Alciel will come fetch them before long. Out of the remaining two, we are still searching for the Astral

Gem, but as for the Spear of Adramelechinus, well, we already know its location.”

“Right, up in the Northern Island... Are you all right, Laila?”

Beads of sweat had formed on Laila’s forehead as Suzuno spoke. Her eyes darted between Suzuno and Chiho, unable to stay in one place for long.

“Ah, um, yes. It, uhh, it’s just a little warm.”

“Oh, is it? Let me turn down the heat a bit.”

Chiho meekly nodded and pushed the Down button on the wall unit a couple of times. It didn’t change Laila’s behavior much.

“So this spear was left behind by Mister Adramelech, the Great Demon General, right?”

The *mister* appellation had never before in history been applied to Adramelech’s name by a human, as far as Suzuno knew. But come to think of it, Chiho had quite a few friends among the Great Demon General ranks by now. Suzuno herself had never seen Adramelech, but he was a member of the Bluehorn clan, gigantically large—more so than the rest of his species—and proud of it. She wondered what he would’ve looked like as a human, had he ever come to Earth. But that wasn’t the issue right now.

“Right. That Spear.”

Suzuno was leaning forward in her seat. Even her palms were a little sweaty.

Despite what she had told Ashiya, she now realized that this was the first time she had ever encouraged Chiho to become actively involved in Ente Isla events. She pondered whether this was a line she shouldn’t cross. Could she really ask this of Chiho? Would discussing it with Emi or Maou first be better? Hesitation and regret welled in her mind...but just for a moment, a side of her she hadn’t realized was there violently pushed away all the indecision.

“To retrieve the Spear, I am in need of your assistance.”

“Pardon?”

Chiho didn’t seem to understand what she meant.

“The other day, Laila, Albert, General Rumack, and I went to the Northern Island on an observation mission. There, we met a woman named Dhin Dhem Wurs, the leader of the island, and as a result of our talks, we’ve determined that you are our best choice for retrieving the Spear.”

“Uhhmm...”

Chiho, not quite able to parse this, reflexively looked at Laila.

“That is apparently the case, yes,” Laila replied in a barely audible voice, face turned to the side as she waved her hand at Suzuno to keep going.

“What would I be doing?” Chiho vaguely asked.

“We will debate over the exact nature of it from here forward. I can tell you, though, that your skills with the bow and arrow will come into play.”

“Bow and arrow?” Chiho paused for a moment. Her bow and arrows were still in storage at her high school’s *kyudo* club.

“And not to pry too much, but do you happen to have any equestrian experience?”

“E-quest-rian?”

The word didn’t pop up in Chiho’s vocabulary very often. It took a few seconds to figure out what Suzuno wanted.

“Um, I’ve never been on a horse in my life. I’m not sure what that has to do with anything, but...”

Of course not, Laila thought. Here they were, asking for her help out of nowhere, quizzing her on her archery and horse skills. She assumed Suzuno was about to go into detail on the Spear of Adramelechinus and their discussions with Wurs, but based on that reaction alone, she assumed Chiho wasn’t aching to join in. It just didn’t seem that way to her.

Until the next moment, that is.

“But are you... I mean, are you sure I’m who you want?”

“Chiho?!”

“You are. In fact, you are who we need. There is no other.”

Chiho's cheeks reddened, her lips stretching out into a smile. This was what people did when they were brimming with happiness.

"But Ente Isla is so huge, and there's lots of superstrong people on it, and I'm sure there are tons of people better at archery than I am. So why me?"

"What we want from you," Suzuno pressed, "is not your skill in battle, of course. In fact, it is nothing that involves fighting and defeating an opponent. I am asking for your archery skills, but it involves more than that, and as you surmised, you will be accompanied by people far more talented than you. But despite all that, I feel your strengths are an absolute must if we want the Spear."

"Suzuno..."

"And let me add that while there is no threat upon your life and we will provide all the support we can, this is a task that involves a heavy physical and mental burden. If you hear me out until the end and feel it is impossible for you to accept, then please, say so to us. You turning us down does not immediately result in a crisis, and we have other measures we can take. It should also be said that this is an offer that everyone except for me has dismissed as too reckless."

"But," Chiho said, interrupting the impassioned plea, "but you nominated me, huh, Suzuno?"

"I did."

"Can you tell me why?"

"I will, after I explain to you everything that has happened and everything that could happen in the future."

"...A-all right."

Chiho felt a little steamrolled at the moment, but she still sat up in her seat and listened on as Suzuno described their visit to Dhin Dhem Wurs and her favorite restaurant.

Carefully omitting the dishonorable nickname Wurs gave her, Suzuno went over their entire visit to Phiyenci, emphasizing how Chiho was the only candidate to fulfill the chief's conditions.

“All right. I understand.”

Chiho made a heavy sigh, letting the tension flow out of her body. Taking a sip from a cup of tea that had long since gone cold, she let out another sigh.

“It sounds like this might take a little while. Do you mind if I make a phone call?”

“Of course not.”

“Ah, wait, um... Chiho?”

Before Laila could stop her, Chiho already had her phone out.

“Hello? Hi! Sorry I’m calling out of nowhere, but do you have a moment to chat? Yeah, I needed to ask you a favor; do you think you can cover a few shifts at work? ...Sure, I’ll run it by Kisaki later, so... Yeah, it’s really crucial that I get this time off. It involves my future, kind of, and there’s this place I’ve got to go to. To figure it out, you know... Oh, good! Thank you so much! I’ll pay back the favor later, okay? Again, sorry this is so sudden. Thanks again! Bye! ...Whew.”

The call was over virtually before it began. Chiho turned back toward Suzuno and Laila.

“All right. I’m free for the next week after school now. What would you like me to do?”

Even before Suzuno explained what was to be done, Chiho had changed her work shifts for them. And what’s more:

“Oh, right. I didn’t call Maou or Yusa just now, so don’t worry about that. That was this college student named Ohki who works there.”

“Chiho?”

“Maou and Yusa aren’t aware of this, right?”

“!”

Laila was taken aback.

“I mean,” Chiho continued before Laila could ask how she knew, “if they knew, at least one of them would be in this room right now. They’re still spending most of their time in Japan, after all. And Maou, you know, I’m sure

he'd slam his foot down the moment I said yes."

"I wholly agree with you. I was about to tell you earlier, but I want to keep the Devil King and Emilia out of the loop until there is no turning back on it."

"I hear you loud and clear!"

"Whoa, Ch-Chiho, why are you so...revved up by this? Are you sure?!"

"Sure I'm sure!" Chiho said sharply, smiling the whole way. "Thank you so much, Suzuno. You aren't still hung up about earlier, are you?"

"Oh, it wasn't the first time, if I may say so. That was something I felt needed addressing sooner or later. To be honest, regardless of what happened in Nerima, I can't help but feel like it hardly affected him very much."

"Kao always yells at me about how I'm too lenient, too loose with him... But thanks. And apart from that, I'll do my best on whatever you want from me."

"Wonderful. Thank you. And we will provide our full support."

"Great!"

"N-no! Oh, once they find out about this..."

"You think Maou will be mad? I'm not doing anything to get angry about here, I don't think. Ashiya and Urushihara are repairing Devil's Castle and working with people on Ente Isla without consulting Maou very much. I'm the same way. I want to help out 'my liege,' so I'm doing what I feel we need to do."

This wasn't what Laila was concerned about, something Chiho knew full well, but she continued on anyway.

"The title of Great Demon General is given only to those who stand at the very peak of demondom in strength and skill. It's up to me to carry out my duty as a General, and as a MgRonald Barista, to answer the expectations of His Demonic Highness."

Laila, unaware that Chiho had been named to the post, lost all ability to speak.

"But after being protected by everyone else for so long, now that Ente Isla needs me for the first time ever... That means I can help out Maou, too. So

please, Laila, let me go to the Northern Island.”

Chiho bowed her head toward her.

“...All right. All right.”

With things having culminated to this point, Laila could no longer fight back.

“Thinking about it, I have no right to go against your will, do I? Not after I sent you out to battle myself. But all right. I’ll have to be our contact with Chief Wurs either way. Now, we’ll need to convince Alciel and the others, get you into the zirga, lecture you about the correct way to handle fragments... Talk about a rush project.”

“Okay. I’ll go to school real quick and retrieve my bow and stuff. I’d like to practice and fine-tune my moves for whatever’s coming tomorrow.”

“Good,” Suzuno said. “Once that is done, I would like you to travel to Ente Isla at once. We need to introduce you to Dhin Dhem Wurs.”

“Whoa! I’m gonna get to meet the most powerful person in the Northern Island? Wow, I’m getting nervous! I’m sorry, can you wait here one moment? I’ll be right back!”

With that, she all but skipped out of her room.

“Do you think this is all right?” Laila asked.

“Nothing to fear. Apart from the constant griping the Devil King will give us later, it is smooth sailing ahead.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of the most. Plus, really, no matter how composed Chiho seems, she’s just a normal teenage girl. The zirga isn’t war, but it *is* a major political event.”

“I think you need to learn a little more about Chiho, Laila.” Suzuno stood up, looking out the window at the street running by the Sasaki residence. “She connected the Devil King and the Hero together, she is beloved by a Sephirah child, she is protected by the Hero’s companions, she was promoted to the rank of Great Demon General, she had hordes of demons bowing down to her, and she uses holy magic to travel across worlds. How many teenage girls do *you* know who can do that?”

Suzuno smiled as she spotted Chiho jogging off to school.

“She is our friend. And she is the strongest person this world knows.”

That evening, after enjoying an audience with Dhin Dhem Wurs, Suzuno, Albert, and Laila, Chiho was formally admitted into the zirga.



With a whistling tear that seemed to echo across the arena, Chiho’s first arrow landed in the center of the target.

“She got it!” Maou shouted, despite himself. But he was drowned out by the rest of the crowd, far more enthusiastic about this round of archers than the previous ones.

“I don’t know much about *kyudo*,” Rika said to Albert, who was using holy magic to pick up the girl’s Japanese, due to her lack of Idea Link skills. “Did Chiho just do something really great?”

“That girl’s archery skills are beyond anything I’ve seen before,” he exclaimed from the adjacent box, smiling and unable to contain his excitement. “As you can see, that girl’s bow is twice the length of what’s normally found ’round the Northern Island. The emphasis around here is less on the accuracy of a single bolt and more on mobility and the stopping power against an enemy force. The Southern Island is the same way, although you’ll see a few differences between the Southern plains and the Northern mountains. I guess you can say it’s not so elegant as all that, y’know? And here you have that huge bow, that unique stance...”

Chiho was still in her postfiring stance, her first shot landing right in the middle of the target, one a little bit larger than the standard used in *kyudo*. This was an exhibition, but zirga participants were still scored based on their bow skills, with points awarded based on how close to the center your arrow landed. Each round featured five volleys of arrows, and a shot on the star in the target’s center was worth ten points, going down to eight, five, three, then one point as you ventured farther away. These zones were marked in concentric circles on the target, much like in typical archery.

In her first two rounds, Chiho had performed perfectly, an almost unheard-of

feat, letting her finish over twenty points ahead of the runner-up. But due to her unique (“strange” by local standards) stance, she had been pegged as a dark-horse candidate by the bookmakers, meaning she was handicapped at pretty high odds.

“For someone like us, landin’ it in the center of the target is a rush of excitement. But not her.”

As Albert spoke, Chiho lowered her bow, then went back into her *monomi* stance, quietly sitting down and mentally preparing for her next shot.

“She’s so...*refined*, you know? Mature.”

The crowd was enrapt, watching on as she sat in silence for her next turn. The man firing after her was a muscle-bound giant, twice her size. He gave the seated Chiho a leer, then flexed his muscles to what seemed like three or four times their original size as he fired. The arrow certainly had the range to hit the target, but unlike Chiho’s straight, calculated shot, it whizzed over in an arc and landed a fair bit below the center.

“Normally, that would elicit cheers, y’see? It sure won’t today.”

“Oh... Wow, Chiho’s really good!”

“Maybe so. But I mean, her whole approach to archery couldn’t be any more different from ours.”

In a world like Ente Isla, where great advancements in holy magic had been made over the years, bow-and-arrow combat had undergone much less development. Unlike antiquity up to the Middle Ages on Earth, magic had always been the driver of long-range attacks on Ente Isla, along with things like one-shot surprise ambushes. The traditional approach in ancient Ente Isla was to start by lobbing long-range magic at each other, then charge forward with infantry or cavalry. Archers were, thus, only effective for a limited amount of time, and no nation dedicated themselves particularly to developing them. They were seen as mid-range threats, and tactics like firing rains of arrows from long distances were only seen in tomes and legends from the distant past, before magic made itself known. The accuracy of these descriptions, however, was an ongoing question. Apart from crossbows and other bows meant for siege or defensive warfare, almost all archery used in Ente Islan combat was seen as an

emergency mid-to-long-range backup when casting magic wasn't possible.

It might be expected to see it used in areas like sniping, assassination, and other long-range purposes, if it weren't for the simple fact that magic advanced more quickly. It was a given that any figure famous or notorious enough to be targeted for murder would always wear clothing or equipment enchanted to dull long-range attacks. And compared with the uncontrollable ranges of magic spells in ancient to medieval times, recent years had seen the rise of limited-range, self-repeating magic, focused more on pinning an enemy down than killing them—in essence, an upgraded version of the humble bow and arrow. Besides, a skilled sorcerer and a skilled archer took about the same amount of time and training to master their craft—but unlike archers, who needed high-quality tools and a ready supply of arrows to fight, a sorcerer could do their job as long as the holy force in the atmosphere was dense enough.

On the Northern Island, with its many jagged peaks and valleys forcing battle to remain small-scale most of the time, archery had been developed for hunting in mountains and forests, for guerrilla warfare, and for covert operations. The third use had proven somewhat effective in coping with the Devil King's Army in recent years, but a bow was still conventionally seen as a weapon that worked best in ranges of about 5 to 11 yards, so little development was done to expand on that.

The targets in this exhibition were normally positioned around 22 yards from the stage.

"Twenty-two yards?" Rika looked down as Albert explained all this. "It looks like more than that."

"Well, that's why this girl is so amazing to us. In our test runs, she landed every single shot dead center, so they moved 'em back another eleven yards to make it a fairer match."

A pity, then, that nobody knew *this* was close to the exact range Chiho worked with the most in her *kyudo* club. To be exact, most high school *kyudo* teams fired in the *kinteki* range, which was about 31 yards. The different measuring systems between the two planets meant they didn't add up exactly, of course, but to Chiho, the challenge involved was totally familiar.

In archery, being able to hit a 32-yard target didn't necessarily mean that closer targets were proportionally easier. But all fields of shooting sports featured separate techniques for short-and long-range targets, and *kyudo* was no exception. To a fan of the sport, it wouldn't be unnatural at all to expect Chiho to have no problem with the 22-yard distance.

But one other difference had quickly made itself clear. In the Northern Island, archery had evolved as a hunting tool, one whose practitioners did away with fancy logic and took an "if I hit it, I'm good" approach. In *kyudo*, with its origins in Bushido, a samurai code, and its emphasis on stances and mannerisms, that was not the case.

"And that," Wurs remarked as she tapped at her monocle, "is another reason why Chiho's out there. That fragment she has."

Then, as if waiting for that cue, Chiho looked straight at them.

"...That's right," Wurs said, as if Chiho was right next to her. "Calm down. You're more steely-eyed than anybody else on stage. Keep up the good work."

Chiho, despite being far too away to hear her, nodded deeply. Even Maou and Emi were floored. Chiho probably saw them in the audience just now. Their voices wouldn't carry, but the box seats were close enough, and empty enough, that they'd be visible. But she didn't acknowledge them, instead turning her face ahead and closing her eyes to focus her spirit. That face, right now, wasn't the face of the high schooler who smiled at them all the time, who warmly accepted them.

"Chi-Sis is tough!"

"Huh?"

Alas Ramus, seated on Wurs's lap, must have seen her face, too. Maou assumed she was talking about how resolute she looked, but Acieth saw it differently.

"Not a single thread of the fear. She has the strong heart right now, she means! Her heart, it is settled."

Looking toward them, Maou realized both Acieth's and Alas Ramus's foreheads were still faintly glowing, ever since Wurs's monocle emitted that

first flash of light. Startled, Maou looked more closely. Then, he saw it.

“Whoa, Laila, is Chi...?”

“That’s right.”

Laila nodded as she revealed a faintly glowing Yesod fragment in the palm of her hand.

“But in the end, this is the result of Chiho’s internal strength and training. If she didn’t have the fundamentals down, any further power I could send to her would be worthless. I tell you, any normal teen wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

She seemed to almost enjoy this.

As they carried on, Chiho’s turn came up again. The crowd let up a mighty cheer as Maou strained his eyes, trying to peek at her right arm. The angle blocked it from his view most of the time—but the moment she launched her second arrow, he spotted a glint on her ring finger, sticking out from the archer’s glove she had on. It was the ring with the Yesod fragment in it.

“...Mm?”

Proceeding with her follow-through, Chiho saw her second shot had landed true and put her bow down.

She had wanted this to go like any other *kyudo* session, so she only had her *haya* and *otoya* arrows in hand, but there were three more rounds to this exhibition. So far, the shots had been routine for her.

“Well done. Nobody can stop you now.”

Retreating to the waiting area, she found Nord Justina, serving as her assistant, greeting her with a smile.

“I was pretty nervous with that one. Emilia and Maou are here. Seeing them made my hands shake.”

“Your performance looked exactly the same to my eyes,” Nord replied, gently smiling like he hadn’t a care in the world. “Simply being here would make any of us nervous, but when your turn is up, it’s like your entire spirit is unified. That’s not something just anyone can do. You should be more confident.”

“...Right. Oh, the feathers are a little messed up on that arrow. Can you replace it with the one over there?”

“Got it.”

Following her instructions, Nord replaced the arrow.

“...Three to go.”

Leaving Nord to care for her arrows, Chiho sat down, gathering herself. Nord was here because he all but fell over himself volunteering for it. He was no powerful sorcerer or fighter, but he was the least public figure among the group, so his assistance would not be seen as political or unjustified. His past tribulations had given him nerves of steel, he had hunted with a bow enough to know how to handle them, and he looked like a tall, muscular, bearded man, which let him play a bodyguard role for the small, young Chiho in this zirga full of huge, lumbering behemoths.

He had just given some encouragement to Chiho, and in Chiho’s eyes, Nord wasn’t at all drowned out by the event. The presence of his wife, Laila, in the audience was one factor behind that—but like Chiho, he was thrust in the middle of this battle against heaven, fully aware of everything going on, but ashamed that he couldn’t help out Emi or Laila in any real way. That’s why he had told Chiho beforehand that being able to help in this world-saving quest behind the scenes came as a sheer joy to him.

In turn, Chiho said to him in her mind,

I’m counting on you.

She was competing in this archery exhibition right now, but her position meant she was a part of all kinds of other ceremonies and conferences, and it was Nord who guided her through them. Having experienced life in the Western Island under Lucifer’s occupation, he knew exactly what refugees returning to their homelands would need—information that proved helpful to Chiho during tortuously long policy discussions. He wasn’t much help with horses, but if she navigated this exhibition the way they had planned it, Chiho wouldn’t have to wing it in the equestrian events anyway.

“Three left.”

Chiho brought her eyes down to the ring on her finger for just a moment, then focused on the star mark on the target far ahead of her. She scowled.

“...Chief Wurs? Laila? I have a favor to ask.”

“Hmm?”

The wrinkles on Dhin Dhem Wurs’s face suddenly deepened.

“Hey. Devil kid.”

“Huhh?!”

The great demon who once had the world wrapped around his finger was now demoted to “devil kid.” Maou might have lived for much longer than Wurs ever would, but the sudden outburst made him all but gasp in response, not that Wurs cared.

“So from what I’m hearing, you know that brave, gutsy girl over there’s fallen in love with you, but you’re just toying with her emotions, huh?”

“Who said that crap to you? Was it you?!”

“Hey! Why’re you blaming me?!”

Laila immediately protested, but she had no right to blame him. She had a rep, and she knew it.

“‘Toying with her emotions’... You might be toeing the line toward that lately, yeah.”

“Emi!!”

Satan, the Devil King, didn’t want to give these baseless accusations the time of day, but then, Wurs looked at him again, tapping her monocle.

“She says she wants to go without this from now on. She wants you two to see what she’s capable of.”

“Huh?”

It wasn’t Maou or Emi, but Laila who voiced her surprise.

“...Hmm?”

Chiho was still standing there, in her follow-through pose, but the arena was

erupting. For the first time, her arrow was just to the right of the star. They were practically neighbors, there on the target, but the first taste of vulnerability she had given the audience today completely changed the atmosphere. The other competitors smiled, looking forward to chasing her down on points, but Chiho remained quiet, returning to her standby position.

“I guess I really am nervous,” she told Nord, before he could speak up. “My stance wasn’t right there.”

“What was wrong with it?”

“I pulled my face up. That’s why it went right.”

In *kyudo*, any issue or bad habit that affected one’s shooting was called *fusei*. In this third shot, the first one fired without the support of her Yesod fragment, Chiho grew so anxious about her arrow going straight that she lifted her face toward the back—a classic *fusei*. This caused her whole body to lean ever-so-slightly to the right, and that was what pulled the arrow away from the star.

“All right. Well, let’s fix that next time. If your muscles are getting sore, I think we’ll get a longer break between the third and fourth rounds, so try to stretch yourself out a little.”

“Oh, do we...? All right. I’ll do that.”

She didn’t know the time schedule for this event. It came as a relief to her. So she released her focus and stretched out her body, working all the soreness and anxiety out.

“...I’m sorry. That’s not actually the only reason.”

“No? What is it?”

Chiho showed Nord her right hand as she gave him her equipment to hold. It had no ring on it.

“I wanted to compete with my own abilities. I kind of got carried away.”

“Oh...”

Nord looked a little nonplussed, but then, he turned toward the targets and shook his head.

“Maybe, but you had it almost in the middle. A lot of the competitors here aren’t getting nearly that close. It’s nothing to be depressed about.”

“...Right.”

She knew Nord was trying to make her feel better, but Chiho was starting to feel deeply anxious. She might have missed the star, but given Chiho’s inherent abilities, it was rare for her to score a hit that close to the center at all. In terms of force and stature, she was completely average for girls her age, which meant she hadn’t developed the muscle strength to fully support her stances.

When it came to archery, there were often large performance differences between high school and college, and between college and adulthood. Growing in size was one cause of this, but another big one was whether or not your body was up for the sport. If it was, that connected to confidence, which, in turn, created internal strength.

Chiho, meanwhile, lacked the physical strength to overpower anyone else. An outside instructor once told her she had good focus, but focus didn’t matter much in sports if it didn’t connect to results. Plus, this habit of turning her face back before firing was one *fusei* habit Chiho had a difficult time shaking. It often put her in the hole during interschool competitions.

In short, no matter how much adulation Laila had for her, that was really the long and short of her latent abilities. Ninety-five percent of why she was setting this zirga meet on fire came down to the Yesod fragment—but unlike Emi’s sword, the fragment in Chiho’s ring didn’t work directly on her. The superhuman exploits she showed off in Tokyo Tower against Gabriel and Raguel were the result of Laila’s magic coursing through the fragment, basically making her a puppet.

Here, though, at this archery competition posing as an exhibition, it was difficult for Laila to control Chiho without at least someone in the Northern Island noticing. If people picked up on the holy force Laila used for the job, Chiho would be instantly booted out of the zirga and deemed unworthy of serving as chief. Instead, Laila had given Chiho a crash course in how to use the fragment, instructing her to use her own holy force to draw power from it and support her archery skills. Simply activating the fragment, however, would drain

Chiho's holy magic by the second half of the event, so instead, Laila activated her own and Chiho's launched off that.

In other words, Chiho's current *kyudo* performance would never have happened without Laila's power.

To someone like Chiho, who had never systematically learned magic and wasn't even from Ente Isla, being placed on this planet didn't make her any better a magician. She had only the barest minimum of natural recovery skills. As Nord put it, borrowing the fragment's force to boost her stamina and skills put a major toll on Chiho's body. She had very little holy force left to work with. It was common knowledge in Ente Isla that all fighters had a store of holy force inside them, large or small; using that force to improve your archery skills wasn't seen as cheating or otherwise improper. Tapping on some external force, however, was more akin to doping, so she needed to save up as much holy force as possible for today's events.

"...No, that's not it."

But even that was only one of many reasons Chiho thought about.

If all she wanted to do was carry out Suzuno's mission, she wouldn't have bothered with all the pomp and circumstance of *kyudo*. She could just fire away, instead of going through the whole power-draining *kai* procession with each shot, and nail every target. But to her, that option was never on the table.

So she softly said the name of someone important to her.

"Maou..."

She wanted to show a part of herself that Maou had never seen before. She wanted to show that her friends were looking to her for help, that she was standing here under her own power. She wanted to show that she had the strength to help him out. That's why she didn't want to cheat.

"Looks like you're still first up. Come on."

After a while, the notice for the fourth round was announced. She took up her bow, like she always did. She wasn't using the Yesod fragment. Or any holy force.

“.....”

Her steps were good.

Her chest positioning was good.

Her string pulling was good.

Her hands were stable.

Her sighting was a little tense, but she felt like she wasn't pulling back too much this time.

From the draw to the extension, she felt her right shoulder going up a bit, but she calmly returned to the correct stance. The time had come to engage.

In her head, she recalled a moment just after she got into high school, gauging which clubs to join. She recalled the beautiful stance of one of the upperclassmen, drawing a white, bamboo bow on the stage in front of her. Now, she was facing a target, like a full moon, straight in front of the *yasurido* band above her grip.

“!”

The arrow, fired away from the bow, made what was probably the most comforting sound she had ever experienced in her short *kyudo* career before hitting the target.

“...Mm?”

Ahead of her lowered bow, she saw the arrow was a tad left of dead center, but still within the star.

Returning to standby for her final shot, she breathed a heavy sigh for the first time all evening.

“Well shot. You must be feeling better.”

Chiho's face softened a little at Nord's applause. She smiled at him. “Normally, I'd be jumping for joy right now.” She looked at the targets, face filled with emotion. “I hit the star for the first time in competition...with my own ability.”

Right here, at the biggest stage of her life, she had done something she never

accomplished before.

“Too bad this wasn’t the final shot...”

There was one more to go. And after she had just fired the best arrow of her life, she could easily let her guard down for the last one. She took a deep breath, trying to dispel the tension and self-satisfaction. Then, another roar came from the crowd. She looked up from the stage, wondering what it was about.

“What...?”

Nord, picking up on things before she could, looked up and down the scoreboard, which, featured the competitors’ names and points, on the stage.

“Oh my goodness, Chiho!”

“Yes?”

Nord stroked his beard hard enough to practically scrape it off, more excited than he normally ever was.

“You won!”

“Huh?” she yelped, any focus she had instantly vanishing.

“The second-place archer missed the target!”

Shock filled her mind.

The large man from before, the only competitor at all close to her in points, was apparently from the Welland clan in the southern flatlands. He had just whiffed his fourth shot. Thanks to that, even if Chiho missed the target on the fifth and everyone else hit dead-center with the rest of their turns, nobody could catch up to her in points.

“Wh-what happened?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, but... Hmm? Look at that...!”

The Welland archer’s bow sat limply in his hand, the string broken and hanging limply below. He stared at it dumbfoundedly for a moment, then shrugged, waved broadly to the crowd, and went to the back of the stage.

Then, he came right up to Chiho.

“Uh, umm...”

“...”

The man, who stood a good head above Nord, unnerved Chiho at first. But:

“Your bow skills are excellent.”

He looked on, admiring her.

“If I fought you in battle and lost, I would ask for nothing more. I tried to follow in your footsteps, but I pushed myself too hard. I am simply not worthy.”

He chuckled at his broken bowstring, then took a knee in front of Chiho.

“Scion of the great Wurs clan, I ask a favor of you.”

Given his participation in this zirga, the man naturally knew Chiho’s name.

“Y-yes?”

“Would you allow me to touch your bow?”

“My bow?”

Chiho looked at it. It was glass fiber with a bamboo core, purchased by her father when she began *kyudo*; maybe a bit high-end for high school sports.

“I know it is unbecoming of me. Asking a fellow warrior, the descendant of Chief Wurs, to reveal the—”

“Sure.”

“—very tools that keep her alive in... Really?!”

The man, not expecting Chiho to give it up so easily, shivered across the entire mass of his body.

“Go ahead. It’s no big deal.”

“Th-thank you.”

He bowed at Nord, likely mistaking him for a Wurs clansman, and accepted the bow from Chiho.

“So light! And this smooth feel, on the surface... It looks like bamboo, but there is something else, as well...”

Saying it was glass fiber was unlikely to mean anything to him, and Chiho didn't really know what "glass fiber" was anyway. So she decided to repeat what the guy at the store said when she went to buy the equipment with her dad.

"It's a combination of bamboo and this special core material. It allows beginners like me to fire fast-moving arrows with relatively little recoil."

This was the bow the shop recommended after she said she'd like to have a bamboo bow in the future. It felt close to bamboo, bending softly on the draw, but still packing a punch on the release. At the same time, the recoil was on the lighter side (a trademark of the series), which made it feel stiffer and stronger than its specifications showed. Thanks to that, the clerk had said, she'd need to get some muscle on her to take full advantage of it.

Whenever she fired a good shot from it, it tended to make this higher-pitched sound, as if informing her whenever she got her stance right. It was said the average glass fiber or carbon fiber bow didn't last as long as pure bamboo, but she intended to stick with this one as long as she could.

"Beginner? You?"

The man couldn't hide his shock. Chiho had landed all but one shot perfectly today, and she called herself a beginner?

"Yes, I've only been at this for around two years. Honestly, all I can say is I felt really good and had a lot of luck today."

"Unbelievable..."

There was also the Yesod fragment, but no need to complicate matters.

"I am sure all the clans are reconsidering their opinions of you Wurses, now that this wunderkind has made herself known. You may be selected as Chief Dhin Dhem's successor, you know."

"Oh, I doubt that. I may be all right with a bow, but I'm terrible on a horse, and I don't know nearly enough about politics, and economics, and the other clans, and stuff. But that lady—um, I mean, Chief Dhin Dhem—she insisted I take my place up here, so..."

She was really here to retrieve the Spear, and she was also the one who insisted on doing this, but she felt at least a few pangs of guilt over butting into one of the most venerated events in the Northern Island. Never in her life did she think she was chief herder material.

“Oh, no need for modesty. The fact that you didn’t even let the other clans finish their rounds will certainly earn *yours* respect today. Tell Chief Dhin Dhem I wished her hello. And also...”

The man cheerfully smiled, handed the bow back to Chiho, and clapped her on the shoulder.

“I cannot wait to see what you’ll do in the Bowman’s Offering.”

“...I’ll try my best.”

The Bowman’s Offering was the final event of the day, where the stage was taken away and the exhibition’s winner would demonstrate his or her best trick shot, dedicating it to their clan, the powers of nature, or the assorted gods worshipped in the Northern Island. This could involve, for example, expressing one’s appreciation for the vast earth by hitting a succession of targets on horseback, or shooting down flying targets (representing the birds that contribute to nature, vegetation, fruits, and meat supplies) like in clay pigeon shooting. Once, a stout archer loaded his bow with three arrows and hit three separate targets at the same time—which, while a bit lacking in religious (or practical) significance, was certainly a shot to remember.

By this point, however, most of the ways one could fire an arrow in a flashy fashion had been exhausted, so the more talented competitors were usually asked what they’d bring to the Bowman’s Offering in advance should they win. Chiho had submitted hers, then discussed and worked it out with Suzuno in advance.

Once the Welland archer left, Nord went up to her.

“Now for the real excitement, huh?”

“Yep.”

“The championship finished early, so we’ll have more time to prepare for it. It doesn’t sound like they’ll move the Bowman’s Offering up in the schedule, so go

ahead and rest up 'til then.”

Chiho nodded, stood up from her kneeling position, bowed to the stage and the targets, and finally felt the tension flow out of her.

“Oh, it’s over?”

Maou sounded a little disappointed as workers began to dismantle the stage and people began to shuffle around them.

“Huh?” Wurs whirled around at him. “Weren’t you complaining about it this whole time?”

“N-no, um...”

“Oh, but I get what Maou’s talking about,” said Rika, still clapping at the stage from her box seat. “Chiho got so far ahead that they called the game, huh?”

Over to the side, the oddsmaker’s booth was a scene of alternating joy and chaos, the dark-horse Chiho’s stunning victory wrecking the entire script of the evening.

“But man, Chiho is sooo talented! I’ve never heard about that part of her before. I bet she’s doing pretty great in her high school team, too. This was so exciting! Maybe I should get back into swimming myself!”

Rika basked in the excitement, nearly driven to tears by the scene, before looking around, distracted.

“Huh? Emi, what’s with your mom?”

“...Oh?”

Emi, who had watched the exhibition at rapt attention and was already swept up in the flurry of emotions leading up to the Bowman’s Offering, only now realized that the seat next to her no longer had Laila in it.

“Mm? Whoa, and what happened to Libicocco over there?”

Maou, for his part, then spotted a distinct lack of the enormous Libicocco in Rika’s box.

“The two of them,” Wurs said, “need to prepare for the Bowman’s Offering.”

“Laila and Libicocco? Prepare how?”

Maou knew that the Offering was a memorial event, a way to honor the winner of the archery contest, but why did they need three people for it?

“Guys, we’ve gone over this. Are you deliberately acting dumb, or what? Is Japan peaceful enough that the Devil King’s and the Hero’s brains have shrunk to a worm’s size? You know what they left to pick up.”

She motioned with her chin up at the Spear, even now towering over the arena.

“So Chiho’s gonna team up with Laila to perform an Offering that I guarantee you’ve never seen before. Meanwhile, the Malebranche is going to attract people’s attention with a little trick of his. While all eyes are on him, Stumpy Scythe’s gonna open a Gate and ram the Spear through it.”

“She—she can do that?”

Maou and Emi had no idea how they were going to retrieve this huge spear during the evening, or how Laila and Libicocco were involved.

“Hey, lady, I’ve been meaning to ask you something...”

Maou took this opportunity to ask Wurs about a term she had been bandying around all day.

“By ‘Stumpy Scythe,’ you don’t mean...”

“A nickname as fancy-pants as ‘Death Scythe’ goes to waste on her,” she bluntly replied. “‘Stumpy Scythe’ is good enough.”

““Bpph!!””

Maou and Emi had suspected an answer like that. They weren’t disappointed. It made both of them crack up at once.

“What’s with you Westerners anyway? Giving a nickname as scary as that to such a cute little lady? Just go with Stumpy Scythe! It’s perfect!”

Every time Wurs used the name, Maou and Emi shuddered a bit, trying their hardest not to burst out in massive, sidesplitting laughter. It was so rude to Suzuno, in so many ways, but Maou had already decided: This was how he’d get back at her for leaving him out of the loop.

“From this point forward, she’s Stumpy Scythe until I get bored of it.”

Just then, a gong sounded to signify that the Bowman’s Offering was ready to start. Maou and the rest of the crowd turned their attention to the arena—then, another clamor rose. In the arena was...nothing particularly special. Chiho assumed a firing pose, and there was a simple archery target and the shadow of the Spear cast over the grounds.

“Uh... Is this gonna work?”

Maou, despite knowing little about the archery scene on two different planets, couldn’t help but be concerned. The distance between Chiho and the target seemed impossibly long. By Maou’s estimation, if the range during the competition was about thirty-three yards, this was a good three times that or so. The sight of Chiho focusing, sizing up this target over a football field’s length away, would’ve stupefied anyone.

In Japan’s feudal days, it was said that even the greatest of archers could not capture a target beyond 30 *ken* (about 60 yards) in length. The official rules of *kyudo* offer an *enteki* (far-target) version where they could be placed up to about 66 yards away from the shooter. The *Toshi-ya* archery competition, held in Kyoto’s Sanjusangen-do Temple for over two centuries in old times, once featured a samurai who fired an arrow about 131 yards—but that was strictly a length competition, not aimed at a target. These days, Sanjusangen-do held a yearly competition called *O-mato Taikai*, or “Festival of the Great Target,” modeled after *Toshi-ya*, but that ran under the 66-yard *enteki* rules. In other words, attempting to hit a target that was about 109 yards away with a regular bow and arrow, both on Earth and in Ente Isla, was unthinkable.

Before the commotion could die down, the event continued with the announcement of the contender’s name, what she was devoting the offering to, and what was about to be attempted. The crowd roared once again. As it was proclaimed, Chiho Sasaki Wurs, winner of the archery exhibition, wished to express her respects for the spear Adramelech left behind by executing a *tsugiya* to imitate its shape.

A *tsugiya*, in *kyudo* parlance, referred to an arrow lodging inside the nock (the notch at the back end of an arrow, for engaging the bowstring) of a previously

fired arrow on the target. This was a rarity, but not unheard of in the world of high school archery, and pulling it off earned you the previous arrow's score added onto the current one. But this occurred almost exclusively in close-range contests, and even then, through sheer coincidence; it was nothing you could really aim for. It was a bit more common for an arrow to bounce off one lodged in the target and fall away; this was called *hazu-uchi*, and the arrow was deemed off target for no points. (If a person ever did pull off a *tsugiya*, it was prudent to temper the celebrating—after all, the contestant just damaged one of their opponent's arrows beyond repair, which could hit the amateur archer's wallet hard.)

So the boast of Chiho performing this move on a 109-yard target was shocking enough. But:

“Are those three arrows in Chiho's hand?”

Emi noticed it first. Short-and long-range arrows differed in structure and shaft diameter; long-range ones had more narrowly sculpted shafts, which made a *tsugiya* even more difficult to pull off.

“Yes,” Wurs effused, “Chiho said that if we're dedicating this to the Spear, two arrows alone wouldn't have enough impact. She really wants to help you guys, you know? It looks to me that you were too busy looking down on her to notice her feelings...or her strengths.”

They looked down on her.

The words stabbed into Maou's and Emi's hearts. Had they only assumed that Chiho, unable to fend for herself in battle, was this thing that required constant protection? Had they decided, somewhere in their minds, that Chiho was, at best, a supporting actor in this effort to invade the heavens? After Chiho made it no secret that she wanted to help Maou and Emi, never wavering from that position for months, did they brush it off as her just being polite?

“If you really intend to kill off our god, then this arrow will serve as the signal flare for the next hundred years of Ente Islan history.”

Chiho gave the crowd a graceful nod of the head, then took an arrow in her right hand, lifted her bow, and assumed the stance. Not a single shred of hesitation was in her eyes, the arrow loaded into her taut bow making her look

like the subject of a fine Japanese artwork painted on a folding screen.

“Chi-Sis! You kin do it!”

“Chiho! You’ve got this!!”

“I like those eyes. Those are fighter’s eyes.”

The fragments held by Alas Ramus and Dhin Dhem Wurs lit up. Chiho’s right hand exhibited a faint light of its own to match.

“...!”

With a clear, high-pitched *zing*, the arrow went aloft—and the next moment, it was lodged right in the middle of the target. The roaring of the crowd dominated the scene. A perfect shot, from 109 yards away.

That alone was hard enough to believe, but even more astounding was the way Chiho immediately began loading her next arrow. When she extended her bow, the crowd fell into nervous silence once more, Alas Ramus and Acieth watching Chiho with bated breath. Maou could almost hear his own heart beating.

“!”

Again, a high-pitched whine heralded the arrow’s trajectory—and then, a lower sound, duller than the thud of hitting the target.

“.....Whoa.”

“Wow, Chiho...”

Maou and Emi couldn’t help but mutter it to themselves. The second arrow was lodged halfway down the shaft of the first. It almost looked like Chiho had simply fired one extremely long arrow into the target.

But the cheers didn’t come. There were three arrows. Everyone was waiting for a three-arrow *tsugiya* from long range, a feat like none before in history.

Taking up the final arrow, Chiho once again took her firing stance, the entire audience focused upon her.

“!”

Her eyes met Maou’s. Her back was turned to the box seats, but just as she

was loading the arrow on her bowstring, she turned her head enough to catch a glimpse at Maou. The single eye looking over her shoulder felt to Maou like it was sucking him in; it made him forget to breathe. He thought she was smiling—but the next moment, Chiho was staring down the target.

Maou wasn't sure if that was really Chiho he saw there at all.

Chiho could feel the holy force bubbling up all across her body. With this final shot, her role would be complete.

This had begun by tricking the rest of the zirga participants into letting her in. She was so happy Suzuno had sought out her help, so happy to help Maou for a change, that she gladly became a part of the Spear-snatching operation. But all those confusing feelings were gone now—and the only thing ahead of her was that tiny, tiny star, barely visible on the left side of her grip...

...or, to be exact, a point even beyond that.

And with that, Chiho called for the great demon who had fought against Maou, trained Maou, fought alongside Maou, and become friends with Maou, a demon whom no one would ever see again.

“May you wield the ancestral spear of the Bluehorns once more, for the sake of Satan, the Devil King.”

The moment the holy force within her activated, the bow and arrow in her hands began to shine a silvery color.

“Wha...?”

Maou had seen that light only once before. It was the light Chiho exuded up on Tokyo Tower. Back there, with Laila and the Yesod fragment backing her up, she had gathered up the demonic force in the area and melted it into the air, as if purifying the barrier around the area. There was no demonic force here. Pulling off the same act wouldn't accomplish anything. But this could only be interpreted as Chiho exerting her full force to its limits, and not only she, but everyone else involved in the plan—Suzuno, Laila, Wurs, Libicocco, Albert—all expected that much from her.

But what happened next was something that nobody could explain later.

Around Chiho's feet, narrow spikes of thornlike ice sprouted up from the ground, slowly swirling around her body like a protective force field before merging with the silvery, shining arrow.

"What...the...?"

Now Maou's breathing stopped. He never thought he would see that magic spell again. Albert and Wurs also sat to attention, not expecting any of this, but Chiho didn't move an eyebrow, her spirit focused solely on the target.

"Thank you, Adramelech."

Then, she fired.

The arrow, spewing off silver light that trailed behind it like powdery snow, made a beautiful sound that seemed to make the earth itself tremble as it reached its target. When it hit home, the three arrows, along with the target itself, were encompassed by a blast of ice from the ground. It spiraled upward to the heavens, shaking off more snow as it did, and, in short order, took on the exact shape of the Spear of Adramelechinus, encasing that miraculous three-arrow shot inside its transparent ice.

"..."

The crowd barely stirred, their eyes darting between the girl and the pair of spears. Chiho, the light surrounding her gone, lowered her bow like nothing was amiss, bowing to the spear of ice that just encased her masterpiece.

"Wh-what is that?!"

The shout from someone in the crowd turned everyone's attention upward.

"Wha...!"

"What on...?"

Maou and Emi followed their neighbors' gazes, gasping in surprise. Chiho was the last to turn toward it—the original Spear, the one that was there before. Now, on one side of it, was the feared and venerated Great Demon General that once ruled the Northern Island.

"Adramelech..."

As if amplifying Maou's whisper, the name Adramelech began to ripple across the grandstand. Adramelech, the great founder who created the Bluehorn clan, had made his fabled return. All his attention was focused on a single point. When the crowd got over their shock enough to follow his eyes, they found the small girl who pulled off that miraculous offering.

"You supported me, didn't you?"

Chiho smiled at the demon before her, with the great, blue head of a bull and a body several times larger than her own.

"Thank you very much."

She then lowered her equipment and bowed at her superior officer in the Devil King's Army.

"Ahh?!"

Then, Adramelech vanished into thin air once more, as a blue light began to descend upon his Spear, forming a shimmering column that began altering the weapon, seemingly melting it into nothingness. Chiho stood back upright, watching the light do its work. And when the blue light finally faded, its blinding sparks no longer illuminating the night, both Adramelech and his Spear were gone, revealing the clear, uncluttered skies of Phiyenci.

All that remained were the befuddled people of the Northern Island and the new spear of ice, forever commemorating the greatest arrow shot ever made. That, and the girl who triggered the entire miracle.



On a set of tatami mats built in the middle of Devil's Castle on the Central Continent, Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara were enjoying lunch around their low *kotatsu* table.

"I swear, man, if you guys all knew, why didn't you tell me?"

"I told you, because we all knew you'd say no. What's the big deal? It worked, dude."

"My sincerest apologies, Your Demonic Highness. By the time I was aware of everything, Bell and Dhin Dhem Wurs were already well into their planning. I

was unable to put a stop to it.”

“Well, yeah, I’m glad it worked out in the end, but...”

Maou put his bowl down, swallowing the remaining rice in his mouth, then looked at the giant object lying by the wall of his cavernous throne room. It was the Spear of Adramelechinus, just as it was before disappearing into that pillar of blue light.

“Do you have any idea how many years of my life that whole experience in Phiyenci took from me?”

“So what? It was cool, huh? That cranky-ass old lady was falling over herself praising you all, and Bell and Laila and Albert Ende were all ‘Oh wow, oh wow...’”

“Well, if I was in on the script, maybe I could’ve appreciated it a little more!”

“Oh, shut up, dude! Since when were you such a timid man, Maou? Why do you lose all your reasoning skills the moment Chiho Sasaki gets involved? Like, dude, did you have any better ideas for this?”

“You shut up!”

“My liege, calm yourself. You are getting grains of rice everywhere.”

“No, you shut up, too! Arrrgh, I hate you guys!”

Maou was lashing out at pretty much everything at the moment.

After the Spear vanished, the rest of the zirga’s events were cancelled for the first time in Northern Island history. The image of Adramelech, the disappearance of his Spear, and the rise of the new one—it was no time for partying. So Chief Herder Dhin Dhem Wurs exercised her authority to commission an immediate investigation, enlisting every clan in the land to aid the effort. Wurs fully knew where the vision came from and where the Spear went, of course—but Chiho’s frozen arrow, and the pillar of ice that resulted, wasn’t in anybody’s game plan.

The original operation called for Chiho to borrow Laila and her Yesod fragment’s power to break all zirga records in the archery exhibition. Then, once she knocked ‘em dead in the Bowman’s Offering, Libicocco would use his

Malebranche-born necromancy and illusion magic to summon a vision of Adramelech. This burst of demonic force would serve as a smoke screen for Suzuno to use her angel's feather pen to transport the Spear through a Gate without the Northern Island's sorcerers noticing the rush of holy force that resulted. It was a miracle, but a human-engineered one.

But then, a miracle really did happen, one not in the script. The thorns of ice that supported Chiho's third shot were, beyond a doubt, the kind of ice magic Adramelech was best at, and the spear of ice that resulted still stood strong, showing zero sign of melting at all. Wurs had already reported to the Holy Magic Administrative Institute through Rumack that her preliminary investigation revealed no sign of demonic force in the edifice, but nobody had any idea why it stayed so perfectly frozen.

"I suppose," Ashiya said, "some kind of anomaly in holy force, like what Laila and our landlord talked about, reacted in some unforeseeable way with Sasaki's Yesod force and the demonic power left behind by Adramelech around Phiyenci. That is all I can surmise."

When Chiho had Laila's backing in the fight on Tokyo Tower, the arrows she shot dispelled the demonic force gathered around Maou and his friends. And given the ice-tree towers that Adramelech drove into the ground across the Northern Island, serving as a sort of antenna network for demonic force, perhaps Chiho's power reacted somehow with what part of Adramelech's force was left in the groundwater. But the nature of that "somehow" was a mystery, as was everything about the ice tower for the time being.

"Honestly, though, I'm happy just leaving the Northern Island to clean up this mess for us. Plus, having that ice tower helps Rumack and Emeralda a bunch, right?"

Word of the miracle of the zirga had already spread worldwide, and with much greater speed and accuracy than anything about the Eastern Island conflict or Emilia's and Alciel's return. Thus, Rumack and Emeralda, playing dumb about the whole thing, had made contact with Chief Herder Dhin Dhem Wurs to stage a tandem investigation of the incident, the pretext being that the analysis of Sankt Ignoreido's groundwater conducted by Albert at the Institute could help with figuring out the mystery ice coming up from underneath

Phiyenci.

The idea that anyone had made off with the original Spear was sheer conjecture at this point. Instead, a litany of wild, wholly nonscientific rumors spread around the island—the Spear shot into the heavens to pursue its master, or returned to the demon realm, or Adramelech popped back in from the afterlife to pick up his forgotten relic, or he saw that the people of the Northern Island had accepted the Spear and used Chiho Sasaki Wurs to replace it with another one.

But regardless of the results or subsequent reactions, the recovery of the Spear of Adramelechinus, the trickiest part of the relic search, ended in great success.

After the Bowman's Offering, Maou and Emi were brought to Chiho at the arena. They greeted her with silence, wholly unsure what to say at first. She had left her bow and arrow with Nord, so her hands were in the slits in her *hakama* pants as she idly fluttered them around.

"Come on," Rika finally said to break the ice, "say something!" She pushed Maou a step forward to make the point clearer.

Chiho, cheeks reddened, looked up at Maou, like a child who expected to be punished shortly.

"Um, Maou, I..."

"Yeah, um..."

Maou, for his part, had trouble dealing with those eyes. He had to work hard not to avert his gaze but somehow managed to succeed. If he avoided her eyes now, he thought, he might not ever be able to look straight at her again.

"Chiho Sasaki..." "Yes?!"

Chiho, called very unexpectedly by her full name, arched her back upward.

"You did great. That was amazing."

"...Maou."

"I'm sure Adramelech is happy, too."

He looked at the spear of ice. It truly was a symbol of the Great Demon General, the one who supported his great, lofty ambition with the power of demonic ice.

Chiho nodded at the observation, then took a deep breath, looking straight at Maou.

“Your Demonic Highness...”

It was the first time she called him that.

“I, the Great Demon General Chiho Sasaki, have completed my mission!”

“...Well done.”

And that was the limit.

“Haaahhhhhhh!”

She let out a deep sigh, then crumpled to the ground.

“Ohh, I was sooo nervous. I was so, so nervous!”

“Y-you okay?!”

Maou brought a hand down to support her. It brought the two of them close together. Their eyes met at point-blank range. It sent Maou into panic for a moment, but Chiho simply gave him a shy, red-tinged smile.

“...Hee-hee! But I think I’m better now.”

“Wha... Oh, uh...yeah.”

“Sorry I did all this dangerous stuff without telling you.”

“N-no, um, it wasn’t dangerous at all. It was a real sight to see. Like, amazing. And Chi, your bow, uh...”

He couldn’t get the words out well, but Chiho still smiled on.

“I’ve received help from a lot of people. I really don’t have much strength on my own.”

“No, of course you do. Laila herself told me you’ve got a strong foundation.”

“Well, I’m just glad you got to see me. It made the effort worth it.”

“Y-yeah...”

“If you want to praise her, just *do* it.”

The overjoyed Chiho and awkward Maou were interrupted by an exasperated Emi behind them.

“E-Emi!”

“Yusa...”

“I swear, Chiho, you do nothing but surprise us. This time, though, I thought I was gonna have a heart attack... Next time, I hope you’ll talk it over with us first.”

“All right. I promise I won’t do this behind your back anymore.”

She gave her a happy nod, then had Maou help her return to her feet.

“Akiko’s already taken over my shifts, and thanks to this zirga, I think I have a clearer view of what’s ahead, Maou.”

A new resolve was in her voice.

“I don’t mind if we wind up taking the long way around. Now I know, no matter how much time it takes, we’re both aiming for the same place. So...I’m ready to follow you as far as it takes.”

“Y-yeah...” That weak reply was about the best Maou could muster.

“Man... Today has been terrible on my heart. In more ways than one...”

“What, you’re still going on about that?”

For once, it wasn’t Urushihara yelling at a whining Maou, but Rika.

“Gnhh... S-Suzuki?!”

Ashiya reacted to her before Maou could.

“Hey there, guys.” Rika was dressed for the outdoors, as if she had recently finished her shift at work. A large paper bag was in her hands. The throne room was far above the ground, and it was doubtful that Rika had made it up here by herself. She had probably used her feather pen to build a Gate that led right here.

Maou gave her a half-dejected smile. “Damn, you can make Gates whenever you want to now, huh?”

“It’s just like taking the plane or bullet train,” Rika indifferently replied. “The first time, you’re all freaking out, worrying if you screwed up your ticket or whatever, but once you’re used to it, it’s like, *What was I so scared of?*”

Neither Maou, nor Ashiya, nor Urushihara had been on either of those transports, so the analogy didn’t mean much to them, but they understood well enough that Rika was now fully used to crossplanetary travel.

“Oh, also, this is late, but...”

“Hmm?”

Rika took her shoes off to go on the tatami-mat floor, then pulled three gift-wrapped boxes out from the bag. She placed them in front of all three demons, the box facing Ashiya notably larger and wrapped fancier than the others.

“The hell’s this?”

“Well, that’s not a very nice way to put it, Maou. It’s your Valentine’s Day chocolate. It’s past the fourteenth now, but we’re still kind of in the general range, so...”

Maou glanced at the Japanese calendar atop the nearby plastic shelving. It was two days past Valentine’s, but considering Kusuda provided her chocolate gift way back on the seventh, this was certainly permissible.

“Why’s Ashiya’s so much bigger?” Urushihara asked, though it was unclear whether he was deliberately trying to make things awkward.

“Well, why do you think? The chocolate for Maou and Urushihara is just for politeness’s sake. My real gift is for Ashiya.”

“?!”

Ashiya suspected this would happen, but the spoken statement still shook him.

“Y-you, Suzuki...?”

“Oh, don’t worry about getting me something for next month, either. I know

you're gonna be busy, so...whenever is fine."

"Um, I'm not sure if it's..."

Ashiya had already refused Rika's advances once. As far as he was concerned, he couldn't have made that clearer to her. It was why he could barely bring himself to see Rika for the past month; they barely even interacted at all.

"You're not? So what is it?"

"That...um..."

"Because you're not being too specific." Rika smiled, knowing how thrown Ashiya was. "You know, I just realized that, come to think of it, you never did dump me, so..."

"Huh? Uhm..."

"In the end, Alciel, you're exactly like someone else I know. Never giving a clear answer."

"..."

That someone now had his back turned to her, grimacing.

"I mean, if you really don't like it, say so. But until then, I'm about as resolute on this as Chiho is, so... Oh, hey, where is Chiho? Down on the ground?"

"Huh? Um, yeah."

"Oh. I better say hi to her, then."

With that, she whipped out her feather pen, as casually as if she was about to write a note to herself, and drove it into the ground, hopping inside the Gate that resulted. Presumably, she used it to head for ground level in an instant. Maou shrugged at how quick and easy she made it seem, but turning back toward the table, he was faced with the full brunt of Urushihara's exasperated gaze upon him.

"Dudes..."

"What?"

"Both of you guys, getting manipulated by women like that... Doesn't that make you question your lives at all? As, like, demons?"

Having Urushihara accuse them of that seemed like a death knell. But for a change, Maou and Ashiya had no words to counter him with.

“Well, guess I’ll clean up the dishes.”

“Oh, me too...”

“Ughh...”

It was right when Maou and Ashiya stood up, attempting to flee Urushihara’s admonishment at all costs, that Farfarello came through the throne-room door, with Libicocco and Ciriatto behind him.

“My liege, Lord Lucifer, and the Great Demon General of the East, pardon us for interrupting you.”

“Mm? What’s up?”

All three were naturally in their full, demonic Malebranche forms, but in all their clawed mandibles, they seemed to be carrying some manner of boxes.

“Your Demonic Highness... My lords...”

The three chieftains gave one box each to Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara. All three looked at them, only to find pink heart stickers on each one. Question marks popped over all their heads at once.

“My liege,” Libicocco dared to begin, “we understand there is a custom in Japan where one gifts those they respect with food as a symbol of their devotion.”

Urushihara was the first to furrow his eyebrows. “...Huh?”

“We of the Malebranche,” Ciriatto continued, “seek your forgiveness for so troubling not only you, but also your Great Demon Generals, and your regent, Camio.”

“...Mm?” Ashiya tilted his head to the side, unsure what Ciriatto meant.

“This is a symbol of our appreciation, and of our renewed loyalty. We only hope you will accept it.”

“...No way.” For the first time in a while, Maou wasn’t sure how to react. “Can I open this?”

The Malebranche nodded at him. He carefully pulled the box open—and inside, accompanied by the sweet aroma of cacao, was a heart-shaped piece of chocolate, a little crudely molded but no doubt crafted with honest love.

“Huh?”

“Th-this...?”

Urushihara and Ashiya, watching from the sides, stared blankly at the chocolate, unsure what was happening before their eyes.

“Uh, Farfarello?”

“Yes, my liege!”

Maou forced his face into an uneasy smile. “Was this...handmade?”

“It was, my liege. I understand that crafting your gift by hand is a sign of one’s sincerity.”

“...Phew... That, uh, wow. Thanks.”

Maou looked at the people surrounding him, unsure how to express the churning emotions in the pit of his stomach. Then, he looked at the box of “polite” chocolate Rika left for him a moment ago. For a moment, he thought about these gruesome Malebranche fighters, working their massive claws and gnarled hands to work melted chocolate into a heart shape, and what could have possibly been the cause behind this spectacle.

“Devil King! Are you here?”

Then, a familiar voice heralded the entrance of a fairly large group of people into the throne room.

“Ugh...”

“N-no...”

It was a small horde of demons, led by Suzuno. There were Bluehorns, there were Iron Scorpions, there were Malebranche, there were smaller goblins and Pájaro Danino—all told, fifty or so demons who had escaped the postwar hunting on the Central Continent. They were in a neat line, nervous looks on their faces, and every one of them carried tiny boxes that didn’t look at all

correctly proportioned to their sizes.

“Y-you...?”

Realizing the three chieftains came here first, Suzuno glared at them, eyebrows down.

“I told you we would all give them together!”

“Hah!” Libicocco shrugged, not looking particularly guilty. “We are nimbler than you rabble, so we finished ahead of you. What is so wrong about delivering our wares first?”

“My apologies,” Farfarello said, looking much more remorseful. “He insisted.”

“B-Bell,” muttered Ashiya as he beheld this monstrous lineup, “what is this...?”

“What does it look like?” Suzuno matter-of-factly stated. “It is their Valentine’s gifts. We wanted to surprise you, but those three just had to come first...”

“Um, this goes well beyond the level of ‘surprise,’ I would say...”

So all those boxes contained handmade chocolate? Suzuno, surmising the doubt written all over Maou’s face, gave him a brisk nod.

“Yes. All of them. We worked hard.”

“You ‘worked hard’?! What the hell’re you making them do?!”

“What is the matter? Are you saying you will not accept the gifts prepared by your beloved staff, each piece molded with love, sincerity, and thankfulness?”

“I-I’m not saying that... I just, like, I really appreciate it, but...”

“Then good. All right, everyone, line up. The Devil King and his Generals are eager to accept your offerings.”

“Wha—”

“N-no, uh...”

“Wait a...”

Under Suzuno’s order, the demons swarmed Maou with their gifts. Suzuno

smiled at his subsequent screaming.

“Ah,” she shamelessly added, “what a joy it is to see such honest love for my leader!”

“Wh-what’s going on? What is this?”

“I—I do not know! I do not know, but...”

“Holy crap, dude, if we let this spread around, we’re gonna have the whole army in here...”

The boxes of handmade chocolate began to pile up. Each one seemed pretty full—and heavy, as Maou found out when he picked one up. By the time the demons filed out, the tatami-mat space looked a bit like a living room with all the stuff packed in boxes for the movers; some of them had even spilled out onto the throne room’s floor.

The three demons, unable to believe what just happened, simply stared at the pile for a while.

“Do not worry,” Suzuno said. “We used three kinds of chocolate—dark, milk, and tea-flavored. You will never be bored, I guarantee it!”

“I’m gonna get so bored of chocolate before I get... Hmm?”

Before he could finish sassing Suzuno, Urushihara spotted a small box atop the chocolate mountain, wrapped in light-green paper with a golden bow around it.

“And that, um... It contains matcha and *wasanbon* candies. And...well, perhaps it is not as infused with affection as the gifts from your faithful horde, but take it anyway.”

“...Uh?”

“I left you entirely out of the loop this time. Call this...an apology.”

Suzuno didn’t look quite as gung ho about this as she did when she sent all those demons in here.

“...Well, thanks. Hmm... *Wasanbon* is, like, high-grade Japanese sugar candy, right?” Maou carefully scoped out the package, then the Spear on the side of

the room. “But yeah, thanks for handling the Spear. Pulling that off really helps me a lot. I’ll have to repay you sometime. Aren’t I supposed to gift you something next month in response to this?”

Ashiya blanched a bit at the term “repay,” but Suzuno blinked a couple of times in surprise, then gave Maou a happy smile.

“I only did what any Great Demon General would do, but if you insist, I will be glad to accept any medals of honor you provide me—”

“Ahhhhhhh! Suzuno!!”

The shout echoed across the throne room like lightning, startling the two of them.

“You said we would all do this together!”

“What could we do, Chiho? All those demons would have crushed you.”

“Daddy! Chocolate! Chocolate!!”

Chiho, Emi, and Alas Ramus were here, and they, too, had some boxes with them. Running up to the three demons, Chiho gave each of them a box, much like Rika from before, each one done up in cute wrapping. In terms of size, it was actually Urushihara who got the largest one, followed by Ashiya, then Maou.

“I got Urushihara a few different brands of snack chips, and Ashiya, I got you a set of rice seasonings.”

The salty selections came as an apparent relief to them both, not that it’d be any better for their health than chocolate. For Maou, however, she had a small box filled with the symbol of her sweet affection.

“And for you, Maou, I have some homemade chocolate, crafted with love!”

“Oh, um, thanks. You made your own chocolate, too, Chi?”

He asked the question even though the answer was obvious from the exquisite wrapping job.

“Yes, I actually made it with all the demons.”

“““Huh?”””

The bombshell of a confession took all three of them aback.

“Yeah, some of the demons asked what she was doing when she brought all the supplies over from Japan. So she told them, and you can see the results now.”

“For real...?”

Would a passing idea from a high school teenager create an entirely new custom in the demon realm? And considering this chocolate came from Earth, what kinds of things would they concoct with the supplies available in Ente Isla? And for that matter, why did demons, who didn’t have to eat food in the first place, respond so eagerly to the idea of giving out chocolate on Valentine’s Day?

“Are they starting to change, too?”

“What are you muttering about? Here.”

“.....Huh?”

Maou honestly had no idea what was in the box Emi just presented to him. Emi apparently expected as much.

“It’s not from me, stupid. Alas Ramus made this.”

“!!” Maou immediately snatched the box away from Emi. “A-Alas Ramus made this?!”

“Yeh! I helped!!”

“That’s right,” Chiho explained. “She poured the chocolate into the heart mold all by herself!”

Maou broke into a wide smile. “W-wow... Wooow! You made Daddy so happy! So you can do hard stuff like that now? Thank you so much, Alas Ramus! I’ll get something for you later, okay?”

“Huh? Okeh.”

Alas Ramus wasn’t fully up on the Valentine’s tradition yet, but having her hair done up in an Emi-style side ponytail and getting patted on the head was all the reward she needed for now.

Just then, Acieth strolled inside, conspicuously helping herself to the contents of the box in her hands.

“Oh, is it all calm now? Maou, this is the box of me. You must pay me back the double on White Day!”

And Maou, still smiling and patting Alas Ramus’s head, yelled, “Get out!!”

“But are you sure this was the best of ideas, Chiho?”

“I think it’s about the best way we could’ve done it. That didn’t put any stress on him, did it?”

“Maybe stress on his teeth and blood sugar, but not on his spirit, no.”

Suzuno, Chiho, and Emi were at the base of Devil’s Castle, having lunch as they watched the demons scarf down the extra chocolate lying around. It turned out that each demon had a raging sweet tooth, apparently, making them wonder if the conventional wisdom of them not eating food was really accurate after all.

“For now,” Chiho said once more as she surveyed the view, “this is good.”

As Emeralda, Acieth, Erone, and the demons warred bitterly over the chocolate, Rika was enjoying some *senbei* crackers (a gift from Japan) with Rumack, and a distance away, Laila and Nord were doing their own chocolate exchange, just like the loving couple they were. Gabriel was watching all this from his perch atop a hammock—or he would have been, if he wasn’t currently napping.

Emi, seeing all this, turned her head down a bit.

“For now, huh?”

“Yusa?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

For now, this was good. This was natural. A natural sort of scene, one that would’ve been impossible to imagine a short time ago.

“For now, it’s good.”

It was later in the evening, the mountain of chocolate from the all-star parade

of demons now stacked up neatly on the *kotatsu* table like a brick wall. It wasn't going anywhere soon—too much to eat, too much to take back to Sasazuka—so presumably, Ashiya or someone tried to organize them a bit in the meantime. Rika's, Suzuno's, and Chiho's boxes, with their uniquely fancy packaging, were separated from the rest of the pile, but not even they were touched today.

“ ... ”

Now, atop the wall of chocolate from the demons, a simple, plain-looking box was placed, decorated with one of Chiho's heart stickers and the kind of cheap paper that came in sets of ten sheets in the bargain bin.

“It's not like I want him to be happy or anything.”

Only the mountain of chocolate could hear the whispering.

“But I just want to be polite, is all. For now.”

The spoken excuse, directed toward nobody in particular, disappeared behind the edifice of the throne—and the presence of the hand that placed that final box on the stack soon vanished into the night.



EPILOGUE

“Uggghhhh, I’m exhausted!”

Flinging her large Boston bag to the floor, Chiho let out all her tension and threw herself onto her bed.

Traveling between worlds for five days in a row had left her feeling run-down. Her mother was unfortunately at home for all those days, with no plans for extended outings, so she needed to schedule things so as not to arouse her suspicion. It made navigating the zirga a major hassle. Through it all, though, she successfully gave Maou his chocolate and helped secure Adramelech’s spear for the Devil King’s Army. Even better, she received heaps of praise from the fellow fighters she looked up to—people who treated her with nothing but kindness, but were in another world in terms of mental makeup.

“Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

Chiho, her face buried in a pillow, recalled how Maou had embraced her when she had collapsed after finishing the Bowman’s Offering.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee...”

For the first time, he had called her by her first name. She was “Sasaki” for the first little while at MgRonald, then always “Chi” after that. Then, out of nowhere, he had called her “Chiho”—“Chiho Sasaki,” to be exact, but same difference.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

Excitement, embarrassment, and pride filled her as she rolled around in bed for a bit. Then, coming back to her senses, she got up.

“Right. Better unpack my stuff.”

Chiho opened up the Boston bag. She never overnighted in Ente Isla, but it was still a trip to an unfamiliar land for her, so she had brought along a coat,

some changes of clothes, and a few other things she thought would be necessary.

“I never really used any of this except for my digital camera...”

She giggled at the towel and clothing inside, still neatly folded. Suzuno and Nord, well versed in Japanese life, had provided her with most of the things she needed, and Wurs and Albert handled everything else.

“Ah well. The camera sure came in handy. I took a ton of photos.”

Chiho had never traveled outside Japan before. In the Central Continent, she made sure not to go farther than around a quarter mile from Devil’s Castle, to avoid causing too much trouble for the people and demons there. For her, getting to see the culture, customs, climate, language, races, animals, and more all over Phiyenci was an incredibly fresh experience.

“What should I do with them, though? Can I get away with printing out a few pics from Phiyenci?”

By this point, she was intimately familiar with demons and angels, even in Japan. While the castle on Isla Centurum and the many different demons she saw were a surprise, it didn’t really feel like another world to her. Only when she ventured into Phiyenci did that feeling hit home—the realization that this was a wholly different realm, filled with millions of people living out their lives.

Her unpacking completed, Chiho went through the photos on her camera.

“It should be fine as long as I avoid the animals you don’t see on Earth, huh?”

The people she met could all pass for regular human beings. The elephant-sized goat she instinctively shot a pic of was out of the question, but as long as she wasn’t showing these photos off to everyone she knew, she figured it’d be all right.

“Hee-hee! That old lady was so surprised.”

Chiho smiled as she looked at the photo she had Laila take of her with Dhin Dhem Wurs. They first met in the speaker’s office in Phiyenci’s National Congress building, overlooked by the Spear of Adramelechinus. To her, Chiho was a “visitor from another planet,” which she naturally had trouble believing

at first—after all, Chiho looked like anybody else on Ente Isla. Being surrounded by holy force allowed her to send off Idea Links at will without the aid of 5-Holy Energy β or her cell phone, which meant she could speak with Ente Islans like a native.

To win her over, Chiho whipped out her camera. In a land like Ente Isla, which lacked even daguerreotype-style photography, carrying a device that captured a perfect image of your surroundings in an instant was more than convincing enough for Wurs. She scrutinized the camera and its LCD screen carefully, and in the end, she had to admit it: Chiho wasn't from around there.



“Well, well! Live as long as I have, and you certainly do see a thing or two. Imagine, a girl from another world competing in the zirga!”

Dhin Dhem Wurs let out a deep sigh as she returned the camera to Chiho, then sized up the four people accompanying her in the Northern Island.

“Laila... Ranga... Stumpy Scythe... Hazel. I would like to speak with this girl in private. Can you leave us alone for a bit?”

“Huh?”

“But...”

“Chief Wurs, that...”

Laila, Rumack, and Suzuno were surprised, while Albert merely stood there silently.

“I'll be fine, guys.”

“Yeah, we can't be frank with each other with you guys all watching her. She's no fighter, right? You've convinced me she's from that other world, but I can certainly picture you browbeating her into coming here.”

“Lidem!”

Laila objected to the sentiment, but without Wurs's cooperation, they were headed nowhere. Suzuno resigned herself to it and dragged Laila out with Albert. In another moment, Chiho was alone in front of a desk, the leader of one of Ente Isla's five continents facing her, the crackling of a fire in the

fireplace the only sound. It was a little nerve-racking.

“Well, I’d tell you to relax, but that’s probably tough for you right now. Your name was Chiho, you said?”

“Yes.”

“How much of what they’re telling me about you is the truth?”

“Huh?”

“Because no offense meant, of course, but you really don’t seem like the sort of person who could lead Satan and the Hero Emilia by the nose, no matter what Laila and Stumpy Scythe tell me. I’d be more ready to believe it if they called you a spoiled rich kid who knows nothing about the world.”

Leading them around by the nose? How had Suzuno described Chiho to Wurs anyway?

“Hazel and Ranga, on the other hand; I can trust in their word. They wouldn’t be singing the praises of somebody unless they really meant it. So I’m just not sure.”

Wurs stood up. In her old age, she was now shorter than even Chiho, but in Chiho’s eyes, she was like a mighty mountain shifting.

“I suppose what I’m asking is this: What are you to Emilia and all the rest?”

“I...”

Chiho felt like she was being interviewed for a part-time job. She didn’t know what Wurs was driving at with this question, but she wasn’t the type to try to lie or bluff her way out of situations like this. So she told the truth.

“I’m their friend.”

“Huh? Their friend?”

“Right. Their friend. There’s no other way to describe it.”

Wurs blinked, as if this was a mighty shock to her. Chiho, sensing suspicion, panicked a bit.

“I’m well aware of what was going on in Ente Isla until two years ago. I guess putting it this way might offend you, Chief Wurs, but if you ask me why I got

involved with things in this world, all I can say is it's because I was friends with Emilia and the Devil King."

"Friends...with Emilia...and the Devil King. You sure you know what the word *friend* means, girl?"

"If it means eating together, going out together, working and cooking and chatting about whatever, that's the kind of thing I've always been doing with them."

"Well, well, well..."

Wurs adjusted her monocle, having trouble taking this in.

"But I guess I'm always causing trouble for Emilia and Satan, too. They have to protect me all the time, and I didn't have the power to repay them ever. So I really want to make the most of this opportunity Suz...um, Crestia Bell and Laila gave me!"

"...Hold on just one moment. This stuff you're telling me is all too new and unfamiliar to an old woman like me. I'm having trouble comprehending it."

Wurs tossed a few more questions Chiho's way. She truthfully answered all of them. The queries had a probing aspect at first, as if testing Chiho out, but midway, they switched to how Emi, Suzuno, and Maou were doing over in Japan, the main subject of Wurs's curiosity. Chiho started calling them "Yusa" and "Maou" again, and toward the end, they were chatting about how Laila's inability to keep her place tidy was still an issue on Earth.

"Well, I take back what I said earlier about you being a spoiled rich girl. You've been through a lot, haven't ya? More than an entire band of knights could handle, I bet."

"I never overcame any of it by myself. I had Yusa and Maou and Suzuno helping me out the whole time."

"You can be as modest as you want about it, but that isn't gonna win you the zirga over the attention sponges you'll be competing against. Stumpy Scythe and Laila are treating the archery exhibition as the main event here, and I'm gonna be the one nominating you, so I want you to push yourself as hard as you do for the demon you're head over heels for."

“That... That’s enough of that! Wait, do you mean...?!”

Being picked on for her love of Maou in the midst of the conversation distracted Chiho from it at first, but Wurs had apparently just agreed to get her into the competition.

“I can personally trust someone a lot more if they’re in it to help out their lover or their best friend, instead of wanting to save all humanity or whatever. So why not? I’d be happy to recommend you for the exhibition.”

“Th-thank you...”

Only Kaori and Chiho’s mother would be so direct as to call Maou her “lover.” Wurs seemed to be rapidly taking a shine to her. But then, she frowned, growing more serious.

“But let me ask you one more thing. I’m not sure Laila and Stumpy Scythe have really thought this through, but I’m sure Hazel and Ranga have and just haven’t voiced it yet. Considering that, I want you to hear me out before you decide what to do. If you decide you want out, be honest with me about it. I’ll simply tell ‘em I turned you down or something, so don’t get all weirdly obstinate about it, all right?”

“O-okay.”

“Right. So I’ve heard you’re going up to the moon to slay a god or whatever, and that if you do that, all the holy force in the world might disappear. Without holy force, none of us in Ente Isla will be able to cast magic. You get me so far?”

“...Yes.”

“So you’re going to borrow Laila’s force to obtain the Spear with your archery skills. Your skills with a bow and arrow are going to be watched by a huge crowd at the zirga.”

“Right.”

“And the better those skills are, the more people are likely to lose their lives from other people’s bows and arrows in the not-too-distant future. Are you all right with that?”

Chiho’s expression was unchanged, something Wurs interpreted to mean she

didn't understand what she was driving at.

"What I'm saying is that if we lose magic as a useful long-range weapon, it's gonna be replaced with the kind of archery skills you're about to show off, no doubt about it. This zirga might change the whole direction of Ente Islan warfare. Do you—"

"That's not related," Chiho interjected.

"It's not?"

"No, it's not." She squared up against the quizzical chief herder. "Me using a bow at the zirga and archery becoming a part of warfare in the far future are two totally different things. Besides, Chief Wurs, you already know everything, so whether I do this or not, you're going to promote archery more than ever for the sake of the Wurs clan's and the Northern Island's future, aren't you?"

"..."

"General Rumack and the people from the Eastern Island are the same way. They're actively joining this campaign, taking on all these burdens that people elsewhere don't comprehend, so they can take action before their rivals. I'm not arrogant enough to think I have enough power to change the world singlehandedly. Even if I wound up being the source for the next generation of battle tactics or whatever, it's up to the people involved to figure out how to use their powers, not me."

She smiled.

"Besides, in this zirga, I need to step up and help out Maou, Yusa, and Alas Ramus. Now's no time to hesitate and worry about whether I change the world or not. You said it yourself, Chief Wurs. That you trust people who want to support their loved ones more than people who want to save the world."

She sat up in her chair, determined.

"That's why I'm joining the zirga."

"...Well, well."

Wurs sat silent for a few moments, then broke into a breezy smile.

"Perhaps I've been relying on my own fragment too much. My ability to judge

character's going on me."

Then, for the first time, she removed her monocle before Chiho's eyes, pointing out the purple fragment on it.

"The fragment on this monocle uses colors to show me whether someone is telling the truth or not. It doesn't tell me if someone's telling a falsehood which they believe is true, which has certainly given me trouble on more than one occasion, let me tell you. But if someone's hiding their fear and talking big with nothing to back it up, I can tell that right out. Perhaps, though, relying on such a useful tool made me fail to notice the courageous light you've been showing me from the beginning."

Wurs kept smiling as she returned to her desk and took out a sheet of paper.

"A spoiled little rich girl? Why, just listen to the junk coming out of my mouth. Stumpy Scythe has certainly played her trump card here. I'd say you've got more hero potential inside you than Emilia ever did."

She tossed the monocle in her pocket, staring straight at Chiho with both eyes.

"It's a pity you aren't my real granddaughter, Chiho Sasaki Wurs."

"Thank you very much, Grandma Lidem."

Chiho bowed her head deeply to this great leader, a woman who loomed larger than the Devil King's Army as she kept an entire continent together.



She had managed to make a grand statement earlier, but the thought of her actions impacting the future of Ente Isla unnerved Chiho. Perhaps, she thought, Dhin Dhem Wurs was picking up on that. But still, it was that exchange that convinced Wurs to put her in the zirga, after all. She hoped they could have an even franker conversation next time; she wanted to hear more about what "working for those you love" meant to her, or the idea of a single person changing the world, given her broad view of history and being a wide-eyed ruler for so many years.

"How strange."

Compared to angels and demons, whose lives go on for centuries or millennia, Wurs hadn't even made it a hundred years—but in Chiho's eyes, it seemed like she knew more about the world than any of them. Was that because Chiho herself was unlikely to make it to a hundred? Because the way they felt time was different?

“...”

Did that mean she couldn't walk together, her and Maou, along the same timeline? Even if they were destined to be united, Chiho would grow old sooner or later, while Maou would remain as young as ever. Would they share the same feelings, as living, breathing people, when that happened? No. Maybe it was impossible from the start.

Coming to this conclusion, Chiho felt her blood run cold. Just as a year's worth of time meant different things to a person and an animal, time from Chiho's perspective didn't work like time from Maou's. The thought was a constant presence in Laila's and Nord's minds, and they still hadn't come to terms with it. As Wurs hinted at, time flowed for Laila at an incomparably slower pace than it did for normal people. For her, it was downright languid.

But what about Maou? There was that answer he kept delaying. There was a future no one could see. And she was doomed to depart this world before the one she loved.

She didn't want that.

“Ahhh.”

Chiho collapsed back into bed, spotting the moon out the window as she looked upward.

“I guess this is how it feels to want eternal youth.”

She could already feel something deep, and dark, gouging a hole in a corner of her mind, something that went beyond the base concept of “right” and “wrong.” But as it did:

“?!”

Suddenly, there was a loud *thud* of something hitting the window. Chiho,

surprised, leaped out of bed. Something soft, spherical, but heavy had bounced off the glass, making a terrific noise before falling toward the ground below. And at the same time:

“Just now...something...”

The holy force within her picked up on something stirring. Something nearby her. But before she could investigate, she had to see if the window was broken, and what that object was.

“Chiho!” her mother shouted from downstairs. “What was that noise?”

“I don’t know! Some kind of ball bounced off the window... Lemme see what it is!”

Carefully, she opened the window that had been struck. It hadn’t shattered, luckily, but whatever hit it had left an obvious smudge on the glass.

“Wow, what is this... Huh?”

Then, she noticed something sticking to the window frame. It astonished her.

“A feather?”

It was a black bird’s feather.

“Oh, weird. Maybe a crow or something flew into the window by accident.”

There wasn’t enough light to fly by outside, but Chiho looked out the window anyway, squinting at the ground below. There, in the compact front yard, she saw a black lump of some sort, the size of a basketball. She didn’t recognize it at first, but as the “night-blinded crow” theory solidified in her mind, she heard a sound...or, really, a voice.

“Nnngh.....cheep...”

This was familiar to her. That low, hoarse voice, unbefitting the reverberation behind it. A bird with black feathers.

“—?!”

Chiho gasped, extending her lungs to their limits, then tore down the stairs, not even pausing to shut the window.

“Chiho? What’s up?”

Ignoring the calls of her mother emerging from the living room, Chiho flew out the door and into the yard. There, squirming in the middle of the lawn:

“C-Camio?!”

It wasn’t a black chicken—just a demon who looked kind of like one.

“Who...goes there...*cheep...cheep...*”

Camio, the Devil’s Regent, the Pájaro Danino demon who helped raise a young Satan and was one of the first members of his force, was here for the first time since that trip to Choshi. But why was he in chicken form, and how did he get bashed against the window?

“Hey, hang in there! What happened to you?! Let’s get you up to my room... Huh?!”

Chiho tried to pick up the curled-up ball of feathers at her feet, but the moment she did, her face tensed up at the feeling of a warm, thick liquid in her hands. She brought one of them up to a dim streetlight nearby. It was covered in blood. He was badly hurt.

“You—you need treatment... Camio, please, stay awake for me!”

“Rr...ngh... I know not who you are, but I thank *yeep...*”

The voice was weak, ready to evaporate away at any moment. Did he not remember her? Was he blinded by the darkness around him? Or did his injuries make him delirious? Chiho was starting to panic. Plus, as she now realized, a grown chicken was a bit larger than she thought—could she get him into her room without her mom noticing?

The bigger question, though, was how to treat him. Based on experience, she knew that demonic force was the best way to heal a wounded demon, but Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara were all at Ente Isla’s Devil’s Castle, unable to immediately return. Was this something she could tackle with the family first aid kit? She was pretty sure she had heard something recently about demons formerly being humans, but she was starting to wonder if he was really a bird-man, or just a chicken all along. Wild, disorganized thoughts ran through her mind.

“N-now what? I hope Mom’s back in the living room...”

“Hnn...gh...chirrrrr...”

“Well, whatever! If worse comes to worst, I’ll have her call a nearby vet...!”

No time left to hesitate. Even the peeping was starting to draw out. Steeling her resolve, Chiho decided to bring him inside—but waiting at the front door for her was someone completely unexpected.

“Sorry. I had to have your mom take a nap for me. Get some hot water going and bring me as many towels as you can—ones you don’t mind getting dirty.”

“A-Amane...?!”

Standing there was a sleepy-eyed Amane Ohguro, her hair let down and a bit of it stuck to her cheek, wearing wrinkled socks and gray sweats under a body-length black coat. Clearly, she had been enjoying a lazy night in until mere moments earlier.

“H-How?! When did you get here? How’d you get inside?!”

“I detected something weird with the network Gabe set up to keep the house safe, so I went through your open window half a minute ago.”

She took Camio from Chiho’s hands as she explained.

“Wash your hands, okay? This is blood from someone bearing demonic force; it might affect your body in bad ways. You should probably have one of those energy shots, just in case.”

“Um, okay.”

Without another word, Amane trundled Camio upstairs. Chiho stared blankly at her for a moment but quickly snapped out of it, ran to the bathroom, and got the red blood off her hands.

“...She’s sleeping.”

Her mother was on the living-room sofa, sleeping in front of the blaring TV like her father tended to do after work. Chiho brought her ear close to her mother’s face, anxious for a moment, but soon confirmed she was resting soundly. So off she went into the bathroom again, fetching some towels, and

then to the kitchen to put a kettle on the stove. And as she was nervously waiting for the water to boil:

“Agh?!”

From upstairs, she heard the ominously loud sound of something falling to the floor. It made her jump into the air. Not even a toppled chest of drawers would produce that much of a shuddering impact. Forgetting about the kettle, she jogged upstairs.

“A-Amane...huh?”

At the door to her room, she froze, transfixed by the scene greeting her. Amane had used her hand to stop the tip of...something coming in from the open window. It was a three-pronged spear. Blood was pouring from her hand as she sneered at whatever was on the other side of it.

“Don’t worry. He’s already fled.”

“Gnhh...*chirrrr*...”

Camio was hanging from her other hand, meaning both of her arms were covered in blood like a scene from a horror film.

“Uh, all right... Is your hand okay?”

“If you could get some bandages later...”

The job looked far too big for bandages to handle, but Amane’s attention was already focused on the weapon, blood dripping from it.

“Well, this ain’t good. If they come for us this way, I’ll never make it in time, no matter what. I think they were targeting this chicken, Chiho, and not you, but we’re gonna have to reconsider our security measures around here.”

Amane tried pulling the trident inside but gave up once it became clear it was longer than the diagonal length of the room.

“Hmm. Pretty old-fashioned weapon to break out. Probably something from the heavens. Look familiar to you?”

“Yes,” Chiho said, solemnly nodding. A giant, three-pronged spear, with images of flames ensconced on it. It belonged to Camael, the Sephirah guardian

angel, who used it in his attack on Sasahata North High School.

“But I thought Maou and Acieth broke this spear in Ente Isla.”

“You already know the guy’s just a normal dude like the rest of us. They go on about these ‘sacred relics’ or whatever, but if they have the original maker or his plans, plus some materials and instructions and tools, they can fix it or make a new one any time... Hey, what’s that sound?”

“Oh, nooooo, I left the kettle on the stove!”

Chiho spun around at the high-pitched whistle and bounded back down the stairs.

“That’s what panics her...?”

Amane chuckled at the sight of a teen casually examining a massive weapon coming through her window, then freaking out at the sound of a kettle. Then, she looked at the two things in her hands and scowled.

“Something tells me there’s some stuff goin’ down in the demon realm.”

Amane already knew that this black chicken was a major authority figure in demondom. If someone like that showed up in Japan looking like this, it was natural to assume an urgent emergency.

“Ugh, I hate this! It’s driving me nuts! This has nothing to do with me! Go somewhere else! Stay away from here!”

In one hand, a bloodied chicken-demon. In the other, a gigantic weapon of murder. And Camio, tasked with finding the Astral Gem and completing the Noah Gear search, was the only one around to listen to the Sephirah descendant’s whining.

“...My liege... I am sorry...*peep*...”

THE AUTHOR, THE AFTERWORD, AND YOU!

I once heard that the person we all should thank the most on Valentine's Day is the guy who invented the concept of giving out chocolate for politeness's sake.

It can be hard to drum up the courage to give chocolate to the one you truly love, but if you're handing out little treats to the people you deal with on a daily basis, most people are like *Fair enough* to that or use it as an excuse to go all out. The end result is more people purchasing chocolate, and it means that a good fifth of all the chocolate sold in Japan each year is consumed on February 14.

You don't see this custom quite as much as you used to in Japanese workplaces, as part of an effort to get rid of useless formalities and encourage nonhostile work environments. In the future, then, Valentine's Day is going back to its original function—women relating their feelings to the one they truly love, or people giving out sweet treats for fun.

Looking back on the history of Valentine's, I have to say they dropped the ball right at the end with White Day, a tradition that was invented and propagated by Japan. The origins of Valentine's Day itself can be traced back years and years, perhaps all the way back to the Roman Empire; White Day, meanwhile, was declared to be March 14 by Japan's National Confectionery Industry Association in 1980. Nobody's quite sure who first sold sweets as a way to "answer" Valentine's gifts, but White Day was entirely an invention by the candy industry to get men to "repay" women for their thoughts.

In Japan, it's traditionally considered rude to accept a gift without offering something in return, maybe half or a third of the value, as compensation of a sort. That explains how White Day got its start, but somewhere along the line, it turned into this "Pay her back three times over for Valentine's!" thing, and people started giving accessories and other regular presents instead of chocolate. The Japan National Confectionery Industry Association was, of

course, trying to get men to buy candy to “answer” women’s Valentine’s overtures, but I’ve never read anything that indicated candy sales going through the roof on March 14 or anything. I’m not sure it really fulfilled what the co-op was trying to do with it.

Some people like to warp this around, saying Valentine’s Day is all just a conspiracy by the sweets industry—but with White Day, that really *is* the case. A tradition is something started by people reacting to the times, the weather, their homeland, or the local natural features, eventually taking root and evolving over time before acquiring its current form. Those same things are still gradually changing our traditions today, perhaps turning them into completely different things in the future—or maybe even causing them to die out.

The Devil Is a Part-Timer! Volume 16 is all about how even the smallest passing thoughts or actions have the potential to affect how we live and which customs we observe. You don’t need to use fancy terms like “the butterfly effect” to see how you, being alive, have a small yet noticeable effect, direct or indirect, on the world around you. It’s not easy to change customs once they take hold, but the world is changing, little by little, right this instant, whether you want it to or not.

Hopefully, you enjoyed this story of people struggling in this whirlpool of changes, trying to find a path for themselves. See you in the next volume!

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